
THE
**BROAD RIVER
REVIEW**

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THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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The Broad River Review 2009 received a "Best of Show" Award from the North Carolina College Media Association. Also, Nikki Raye Rice won 2nd Place in Fiction, while Sarajane Burroughs and Trudy Roth received Honorable Mention in Poetry and Art, respectively.

The J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is given annually to a senior English major at Gardner-Webb University for a portfolio of poetry. *The Broad River Review* Editors' Prizes in Poetry and Fiction are chosen from among all poetry and prose submissions by Gardner-Webb University students.

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A Plague of Hubris

In visions of my youth,
the wonderland flicker of film
promised me fire breathing
20-story tall monsters.
But forever they remain cellulose dreams.

In their place, I was given
a cold sweat, sit-up-in-bed nightmare
of burning earth and sky
illuminated by a mushroom sun.
In my tortured slumber,
I was not one of the lucky ones
at the center, body scattered to foreign lands.
All that remains, shadows painted on the walls.

Nor was I one to go slowly
from the invisible fire in the cells
that stole strength and hunger and the future.
I only watched the world burn from the
belly of a bird of war.

As generations passed in restless moments,
the woken plague that once was hidden
beneath our feet now passes as an unseen curse
from mother to child.

Raised by morning's soft glow,
shadows of dream memory dance behind weary eyes.
Cold, human fear escapes as a lost realization
fades too soon to teach its lesson.

Through Crimson Shades

We were children once,
innocent and
sitting in a field

back
to
back,

watching night
spread across the world.
And stars

one
by
one

took flight
in their nightly dance
to light our way to now.

We were not then makers of war,
painters of sorrow
who took brush

and granted the world a crimson
tone to look back through
to kinder times.

NICHOLAS LAUGH RIDGE

To Those Who Dream of Peace

Lay down your lovers for this last night.
With the rising sun, we will march to the shore of a
new world and drown the voices calling us home.

We will fight without dying.
Heaven opens before us,
lit by a mushroom sun.

It's all we have wanted, all we ever asked.
Now we have to turn our backs and leave
what's left to those without blood on their hands.

We made our choices and shaped our lives.
We have lived to meet our fates and
now we stand at the end of our world.

We will awaken from our dreams.
Useless now, we wander,
lost from who we were.

Longing to see the forgotten faces,
our warring souls have grown tired.
We've become more than what we were born.
We cannot die, we will merely fade away.

In August

In August, the porch swing invites me to sit
and let my voice get lazy,
tapping my feet to the three-finger rolling
banjo my uncle says he can't play
just like I learned it so long ago.
I lean back my head
and feel the sweat build on my neck,
remembering the way we must have looked
from the kitchen window:
red-headed roguish dolls
thrashing the thorny bushes
with wooden swords and naked feet.

In Augusts, our voices were small
amid the sawing of jar flies
and the rustling of finches
in the pear tree.
We heard the distant storm
rolling in against the wet-hot noon
as the muddy catfish wagged their barbels
at dragonflies on the fishing line.
Our patience was yet too young
to wait for the first bite.

I can still see myself running
up the hill in the sunburned, knee-high grass,
as Maw-Maw sets the dishes on the table
and readies a washcloth to clean
our dirt-streaked hands and sticky faces.
I am out of breath and running
from the mosquitoes in the pond
or the approaching storm
or the end of the summer.

JENNIFER HART

Perhaps I was running from time itself,
although I do not fully understand why I ran,
or why it got so hot
in August.

In-Between Glory

At the first race of our conference championship swim meet, the odds are not in my favor. Based upon how the season has gone, I have reached the point at which I can no longer withstand the agony of failure. Yet something deep within me—a forgotten confidence, a quiet spirit—gives me a faint but dependent hope that pushes me forward to the starting blocks. My heart skips as the importance of this moment overwhelms me—bright lights, bold colors, loud music, cheering crowd. Nervous excitement weighs heavy in the air. Eyes fixed forward and focused, I slowly lower my goggles over my eyes, adjusting the straps carefully. A deep, heavy breath. This can be my time. A short whistle blows three times, followed by another longer one. I step up onto the block. Gripping it firmly with my toes, I take my mark. The arena falls increasingly silent, then the buzzer sounds sharply, and impulse plunges me into the cool, crisp water. A combination of instinct and muscle memory from years of practice begins to propel me. Stroke, breathe, turn. Stroke, breathe, turn. My head rotates from air to water, and the roar of the crowd drones in and out of my ears, along with flashes of waving arms, jumping bodies, and electric pom-poms. I'm almost there—just a little farther. Out of nowhere, an energy foreign to me drives me to the finish, my fingers striking the wall as all heads turn to look at the times on the scoreboard.

I wake when most of the world lies fast asleep; humans relaxed, heavy in their warm, cozy beds; birds nuzzled and calm in their nests, all while the sun avoids the fine line of the deep horizon. At the precious and quiet hour of 5:00 a.m., two days a week, the loud sting of my alarm clock's tune abruptly shakes me into consciousness. It's pitch black outside, and I dive into the cold pool for morning practice.

I hold a tight schedule. There is no such thing as free time, wasting time, nap time or chill time when you are an NCAA Division I student athlete. On average, I devote twenty-two hours a week to practice (not including meets held on various weekends), which translates into

three hours every afternoon Monday through Friday, an hour and a half on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and four hours on Saturdays. Thankfully, Sundays are off. Out of curiosity, I sat down one day during my copious free time and added and averaged the hours in the pool. Sadly, I calculated that I spend roughly one full *month* training for my sport out of the eight months we attend school each year. This fact alone is discouraging. It's a tremendous, daily struggle to prioritize my time between school, swimming, a social life, 'me' time, and God time. I feel myself pulled in a million directions, everyone and everything wanting a piece of me. By stretching myself in this way during the past season, I soon saw God answering one of my recent prayers. My request? Challenge me, God.

I have always been one of the people on top, the one in high school at whom others looked—caption of the swim team, award winner, record breaker. But beyond what natural God-given talent I was given, I worked hard. As I dropped swim times, devotion and hard work came easily because I reaped tangible benefits that caused my competitive drive to kick in higher gear. A red ribbon, a blue medal, a plaque with my name on it. I must have sped too long on this fast track, however, assuming my talent and abilities would take me to the highest podium with the heaviest medal around my neck. I soon found that I had pushed the cruise control button on my Ferrari and could no longer reach the gas pedal to increase my speed.

My junior and senior years in high school were stagnant. Even though my times right where they usually were, I could feel the whole world beginning to catch up to me and fell into muddling my way through the pool. I was going through the motions, as they say. Swimmers I had been faster than slowly began to climb the ladder, many eventually surpassing my times. It was a difficult experience. I continued to try my best, pushing through the disappointment of seeing the same times flash on the clock, but the burning passion inside me, once steady and strong, now began to flicker.

When I reached college, I trained harder than I ever had in my entire life, longer hours and a higher level of intensity, yet I was unable to break through the mental barrier I had now begun to build. It started out as a short brick wall at first, barely higher than my ankles at best, but grew in height and weight over the last two years I have been in college.

I became somewhat of a brick collector, you could say, gathering a brick from a bad practice, a few from a disappointing meet, another thrown in after each race I didn't perform to my potential. I never told anyone how heavy the bricks really were, or how high the barrier began to grow. Instead of staying at the same times and speed, I started getting slower. No one—not I, my coaches, or my teammates—quite understood why. I had been sick occasionally, but we all knew there had to be something more. Collectively, we were all confused, frustrated, and discouraged.

On the outside, I tried to hide my frustration and disappointment by keeping my feelings to myself. Everyone was doing well around me, my friends breaking school records, swimming best times, showing outstanding improvement, receiving recognition, earning their spot on relays—all achievements I had attained in my past. My dreams were slowly being washed away in the water's rushing current right before me.

I consider myself a leader on the team and take the role very seriously. I tried not to show any signs of anger and did my best to put on a positive face for those who look up to me. Although my abilities in the water began to waver, I did not want to jeopardize my team's success with negativity or sadness. But after my races, once alone in the cool-down pool, a steady flow of tears streamed behind my goggles. I questioned God time and time again: "Why is this happening to me?" I had struggled with health issues all season, but more than that, I began to realize I was slowly losing important pieces of myself—confidence, enthusiasm, and motivation.

For the first time in my swimming career, I learned what it felt like to not be one of the best. I wasn't the one people talked about after a meet; no one recognized my efforts. The hard work I put in didn't amount to anything. Isn't that the opposite of what everyone tells you? I discovered what it was like to not be the star swimmer or the one in the spotlight. I know this is something that countless people face every day, but when it came to swimming, I had never felt unimportant or trivial. For the first time, I knew what the great majority of my teammates probably felt like, and it made me feel guilty for not recognizing this potential emotion sooner. Of course every person is needed and important for reasons outside and beyond the pool, but I realized firsthand how detached and unaware I was of the feelings and emotions of some of my closest teammates.

Every time I felt terrible in the water, I tried to push it aside and blamed the extra work I was putting in. "Once I rest, I'll swim fast," I would say, trying to reassure myself. At our halfway meet at Davidson College, I was sure I would improve because we rested for a week in preparation for it. Warming up, I didn't feel amazing, but I shook it off in order to mentally prepare for my races. The first one was the 200 Individual Medley—one of my best events. Setting my goals realistically, I aimed to finish in 2:10.50—the same time I swam last year in this event. Butterflies in my stomach, like always, I stood behind the block nervously readjusting my goggles out of habit, followed by a brief moment of tranquility for a short prayer, then whistle blew and I stepped up to the block.

Once in the water, I felt just as weak and awkward as I had all season. Praying to God over and over again in my head: "Please help me finish, please help me hold on." But my arms began to slow their pace. Breathing to my right, I looked into the face of the girl next to me. We stayed together, stroke for stroke, for a few seconds, but then she was gone, pulling ahead of me, leaving me with nothing more than the hard splashes from her fast feet. I hit the wall, already knowing the outcome. After giving myself a moment to recover, I finally looked to the scoreboard. I had swum four seconds slower than my conservative target. It may not sound like a lot, but in swimming it's a lifetime.

Holding my feelings inside, now a common occurrence I'd grown accustomed to, I waddled over to my assistance coach, Ashley. Knowing my disappointment, she gave me the same response as always, "Wasn't your best, but you will get better." After working through tears and anger in the cool-down pool, I gathered myself and put the race behind me. But then it happened. My head coach came up to me, frustrated that I hadn't gone over with Ashley my splits from the previous race. I just snapped. I finally broke. The brick wall I kept inside myself came crashing down as my heart fell on the pool deck in hard tears for everyone to see. I couldn't talk. I couldn't catch my breath. My best friend on the team was next to me, thankfully, and pulled me out into the hall. I lay down on the hard tile floor and sobbed, again asking God the same questions I had asked Him all season.

A week later while home for Thanksgiving, I went into the hospital to have a few tests done. The bloodwork notified me that I was

sick with mononucleosis. This might not sound like the best news, but it was a relief to find something wrong with me, something to use as an excuse for how bad I was swimming and feeling physically. Not long after I found out I had mono, I recovered quickly, but then moved on to a series of other sicknesses—viruses, sinus infections—and was on antibiotics up until four days before our conference meet.

As I prepared for that meet, I followed my heart. Looking back at how the season had gone, I felt like I had nothing to lose. The sting of knowing my coaches didn't expect much cut deeply into my self-esteem. While practicing relay exchanges a few days in advance, I wasn't included in the lineup. Though hurting, I learned to accept it, using the pain and frustration to motivate myself.

All season long, I wanted to quit. But I knew deep down that if I quit, I would only be letting my team down, always regretting the decision to give up something great, something I once loved, for the sole sake of wanting to take the easy way out. Behind my persistence still lay fear of disappointment, doubt of ability, and an exhausted soul. I felt as if I were becoming somebody not myself, somebody who misplaced her identity in various aspects of her life, now stuck fumbling in the dark.

After touching the wall, I begin a fast and continuous cycle of inhaling the chlorinated air above the surface of the water. The arena shakes. I don't know what to expect as I remove the blurred and foggy goggles from my hot and beating forehead. Exhausted, I look to the scoreboard. Not understanding or believing the numbers beside my name, I stare at it for what seems an eternity. Over and over my eyes dart back and forth. *Steadman, S. 2:05.81.* My head tilts, eyes squint, and I go back again. *Steadman, S. 2:05.81.* Shouts and screams from teammates standing above me finally break the frozen cycle I'm stuck in. "Steadie! Oh my gosh! Steadie!" My body instantly relaxes in a tremendous sigh of both relief and disbelief. I allow my head to fall back and rest on the pool's edge. I have beaten my personal record in the 200 Individual Medley by five seconds. A huge smile breaks across my face, completely obliterating the brick wall built up around me. I look up into the stands for my parents; I think my mom is crying. I look over to the side of the pool where my team stands and can't help but allow my whole face to show the ecstatic disbelief that is overwhelming me. I see

my coach, Ashley, standing on the edge pointing her finger right at me as she nods her head up and down, a huge smile across her face, too. I did it. Now feeling weightless, I practically float out of the pool, to land in a mob of excited teammates jumping around me, each one taking his or her turn at nearly squeezing me to death in congratulations.

Walking down the pool deck to meet the rest of my team, I'm wisped between coaches and teammates who are giving me great bear hugs and the kind of high-fives that leave your hand stinging for minutes after its been hit. I couldn't understand it. I don't think anyone else did, either. How did I swim so fast at our conference meet in a year I had fallen the farthest and done the worst? It didn't make sense.

While sitting in the bathroom stall once the excitement has cooled down after my first race, I am still. Humbly and quietly positioned, I lower my head in both disbelief and gratitude, thanking God for the challenge He placed before me. I also thank Him for His demand, His will, and for allowing me to lose myself in order to grow closer in fellowship with Him. As imperfect humans, we will not always reach our goals, but if we do, we must rejoice and be thankful. At this silent, yet powerful moment by myself, I know God. I understand His purpose, not mine. I realize that everything in this life serves a purpose and crafts us into the better people we could not become on our own.

Psalm 46:10: Be still and know that I am God.

After three days of drastically dropping time in all three of my events and getting a place back on most of the relays, I stood on the podium at the end of the conference championship meet. All I could think of was God. My success cannot be attributed solely to regaining my health, as I had been struggling with that for the past four years. There is no possible way I could have dropped that much time in each of my events unless something greater was working behind it all.

Once again I have felt the satisfying weight of a medal being placed around my neck, accompanied by the familiar official's firm handshake. But it was a completely different experience this time. Although the past few years have been extremely difficult and frustrating, full of days and moments when I wanted to quit or give up, I wouldn't change the life story God has written for me if given the chance. I've learned more about God, others, and myself during these moments of disappointment and defeat than I ever did throughout the previous nine

years of competition. I learned that you must lean on God, your true friends, and teammates to help keep you going when you cannot do so yourself. No one is perfect; each one of us struggles. We must recognize the need in others and lift each other when we begin to stumble. We will fail one another, yes, but we will find comfort in knowing that God works for the greater good in our lives, only wanting the best for us.

The Winter

November rendered purgatorial: a toppling over
into grace from behind, as if salvation lay not
so much in the forefront of what we had left,
but in the manumission of ever-moving forward.

The drifts were easy; it was only a matter of
shoveling away from the driveway. It was the ice,
a black laugh from a world beyond this one,
which couldn't wait to trip us up, slicking

the wheels of what we thought must be justice,
one tricky step at a time, and when you fell
and I just stood there, dog in hand, simple
in slippers, you rightly looked stricken, as if God

had spoken. When I think now of that winter,
trying still to subsist in the ghost of its bones,
I no longer pine for the ideal not there; instead,
I see your falling body, I already there to save you.

Rare Lilies in Season

I whistle Lilly-Marlene, reminiscing
an old scene as we pop down
our gravel drive, sipping Hi-Five coffee,
the sweetness of honeysuckle
wafting through shadows, toxic words forgotten.

Rocky Shoals is our destination where myriad
spider lilies anchor in swift running water
across a broad sweep of shallow rocks,
a stadium of waving white and green
entrenched to change the course of the river.

Gawkers crowd the banks, talking
about a pregnant water moccasin in the shallows.
Posing as a thick branch she watches
the feet of those who throw stones.

Sisters, Waiting

My beloved sister,
my baby sister,
my tell-her-everything sister,
sits next to me on a row of plastic chairs,
pressed together in the waiting room
outside Intensive Care.

It's midnight. We're talked out.

Nodding toward my unguarded purse,
she quotes Mom, "Put that on your lap."

"Hand through the strap."
I complete the advice and comply.

Our eyelids close. Open. Close.

She sleeps
or does something like sleep.
I sleep
or do something like sleep.

Two middle aged sisters, nodding,
waiting to see where Daddy goes
this time. Slouched toward each other,
crowns touching, resting, head to head.
Even in sleep, twins, conjoined
in the spirit of holding on.

We know that the prognosis
for separation is good
and so we pray,
"May the rending be
more tender than terrible,
on some far off day?"

We sleep, but even in sleep,
the conversation seeps
through scalp and skull, bone and skin,
just temporal pulsing, easy as heartbeat,
until her blood demands,
"Letting go? Born to die?
That's His plan?"

I twitch.
We bump heads.
Awake. Our purses fall.
Their big mouths open.
Her cell phone blinks and rings,
one false ring, and skitters
towards the snack machine.

We pick combs, wallets, pads,
and pens from the floor.

Sit up, hold hands, close
our eyes again, wondering,
"How is Daddy doing?"
Not ready for the answer,
we take our second waking slowly.
The soft-soled nurse approaches.
We hear her gently calling
our father's name. We go to him
and begin a whole new conversation,
about a world that may,
or may not, end.

The Peak

Above the top of Chimney Rock,
where paired ravens soar
and dive the curving cliffs for sport,
water moves in many guises, ever down.
Its dark skin slips, spreads
across gray granite faces.
Like old glass, it sheets
from pool to deepening pool,
finally falling fast, narrow, white,
to feed the palette of the trees below:
lobed scarlet oak,
nankeen beech and tawny hickory,
the ocher-ambers of the ash
and blackgum's umber-amaranth.
But best of all, the maple leaves,
from primrose to persimmon
to translucent orange glow,
each year dying brighter than the rest.

Slow Sinking Feeling

I remember things being different.
The tears come and I can't tell why anymore.
I tie these sad grey bricks to my ankles.
I bathe in puddles of my own fear.

The tears come and I can't tell why anymore.
No one threw me a life preserver while I drowned.
I bathed in puddles of my own fear,
only wishing for change or death.

No one threw me a life preserver while I drowned.
Comfort flees from the numbness,
only wishing for change or death –
knowing now that change won't come.

Comfort flees from the numbness.
I will rest at the bottom of this salt sea,
knowing now that change won't come –
I breathe in as the tears hide in the sea.

I will rest at the bottom of this salt sea.
I tie these sad grey bricks to my ankles.
I breathe in as the tears hide in the sea.
I remember things being different.

Louisa Mourns

She was maybe twelve,
Too young to see a brother die.
Too young to cry a puffy-streaked face
And red-rims around grey eyes,
Too young to suck breath through clinched teeth
Too young to swallow the boiled-egg grief that chokes the throat.

The house smell mingled dirt poor with carnations
Eugene lay in the living room with his red hair shining,
With funeral flowers stacked round his white freckled face.
He was seven. His cheeks had been rosied.
He wore his first new suit. Navy, it fit.
And he looked like he didn't mind being dead.

"Will it ever get easier?" she asked my fourteen-year-old wisdom.
"A little," I said. I didn't tell her how loud the dead can call your name.
I didn't tell her about the rewound dreams.
I didn't tell her about the dissection of childhood sins,
The pleas for belief, for absolution from the infinitesimal,
The smears of guilt that tears cannot clean.

Parlor Bestiary

Skink

I saw you slither silent
Beneath the velvet sofa and
Across the shaggy carpet,
Tail glistened sinuous
Blue in the slant of the sun.

Cat

You crept across the carpet
Watching for crawling creatures,
Honing some forgotten skill
Needed to nurse the kittens
You will never more conceive.

Mouse

Safe in shredded news in wall,
Wait for light of day to wane
Until want and will drive you
Through the chink into vastness,
Wary, watchful, not yet safe.

Skink Cat Mouse

You lost your handsome tail.
Better than head and hand
That you can not grow again.
For now, hide, waddle awkward.

LES BROWN

You caught it with claw and tooth,
A slim, glistening blue tail
Cast by skink to get away.
Be proud while you preen and purr.

It's time to move once more from
Ancient obituaries,
To measure scavenging skill
And hope to snuggle among
The dead again tomorrow.

Duped

My best friend's parents are getting a divorce. Jessica told me while we were getting dressed for gym. Her eyes were red from crying, so when she announced she had something awful to tell me I expected it to be about Tyler. She's been in love with him since sixth grade. We were eighth graders, almost ninth then 'cause it was June and only seventeen days from summer vacation. Anyway, I figured she'd say he broke up with her; he was always doing that. He's cute and can get any girl he wants. He comes back to Jessica after a week or two, but you'd think she'd get sick of it already and just tell him to get lost. She hasn't, not yet, maybe she never will. So there I am tying my Nikes waiting to hear the same old, same old, when she blurts out, "My parents are getting a divorce."

I got an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach, but calmly as I could, I say, "They're probably hitting a hard patch." My mom said those exact words a few years ago when she and my dad were fighting a lot. *Hitting a hard patch.* I didn't buy it then either, but I didn't know what else to say. She looked as crazed as when Tyler started hanging out with Nicole Coleman, our arch enemy. Thank goodness that only lasted a couple of days.

"He moved out this morning. Packed two suitcases and said he'd come back for the rest. My mother cried the whole time." Jessica blotted her face with a tissue.

So that's when it started for me. Well, not really, but looking back it does seem that way because that's when I started worrying about divorce all the time, about it being my parents' turn next. Divorce was spreading through our school as fast as a bad flu. Even Mrs. Taylor, the math teacher, was getting one. I figured if I worried about it enough, maybe it wouldn't happen. That didn't work though; it happened, but not when I was expecting it.

About two weeks after Jessica's news, I get home from school and my mom's all excited. She's got everything pulled out of the hall closet and is on her knees dividing the stuff into piles. The winter coats are stacked in a big lump, along with our boots, wool hats and gloves.

"We won't be needing these anymore," she says smiling.

I'm clueless to know why, but that's okay cause she can't wait to tell me. "We're moving to Florida," she says. "You're going to love it, Allison. So sunny and warm all the time. We'll buy a house with our own pool. Can you imagine swimming any time you want?"

At this point I'm getting vicious stomach cramps. They're ripping through my insides like a set of steak knives. There's no way I'm moving to Florida or anywhere else for that matter. I'm going into the ninth grade after the summer with all my friends. I've lived in New Jersey my whole life, I'm not about to leave now.

"Allison, why are you just standing there like that? Say something."

Sometimes my mom is so dense I can't believe she's related to me. How can she not know that moving is entirely out of the question?

"I'm not going," I say, and start up the stairs to my room.

She gets up and stands with her arms crossed over her chest, a nervous smile plastered on her face. Finally, she gets it, I'm not going down without a fight. "You'll love it, I know you will," she says. Convincing she is not.

Then it hits me like a ton of bricks. How crazy that it took this long. My parents are getting a divorce, and my mom plans to make a clean slate of it in a state miles away, so far it might as well be a foreign country. And actually, when we went on vacation there the summer I was nine it was like a foreign country. Lizards skittering through the streets, parrots screeching from the palm trees, sweltering sun, raindrops as big as snowballs, lightning and thunder so fierce you'd think the world was coming to an end. Sure the hotel in Miami was cool, but everything else was strange, even some of the food. Cuban they said it was. And almost nobody spoke English. There was no way I was moving there. I'd move in with Jessica and her mother. But then I had to know, had to ask. My heart beat faster than a food processor as I said each word: "Are... you... and... dad... getting... a... divorce?"

"Oh, Allison." She came over and put her arms around me. "Of course not. This is dad's idea. He says we can all use a change. It'll be good for his business too. Living in Florida is going to be great. You'll see. And he'll be able to work partly from home. He'll be around a lot more."

I was imminently relieved my parents weren't getting a divorce but still, moving would be absolute hell.

The first week that August my mom and I are unpacking the boxes that just came in the moving truck. Good thing too, cause we'd been sleeping on air mattresses for five days, alternating between the two pairs of shorts and two shirts we'd each brought along, and eating only fast food. I'm no health nut, but I'd ingested enough burgers, fries and breakfast burritos to last me a year. We flew to Florida early so we wouldn't miss the truck. My dad had to stay in New Jersey for a few days to wrap things up with his business. It's import/export, which sounds totally boring, unlike my dad who is, as my aunt Ginny often says, the life of the party. Always telling a joke, making me laugh so hard my eyes tear. My mom tells jokes too, but they're not funny. She usually laughs at them though. Well, at least someone does.

It's blistering hot outside, and we've got the air conditioner revved up and blowing like mad. This place is definitely going to take some getting used to. As soon as I go out my bangs curl, and there's not much I hate more than twisty little bangs. The phone rings, and my mom runs into the kitchen to get it. She comes back a few minutes later, and I can see that her excitement over this move has definitely slipped a few notches.

"That was your father," she says. I look up from a box of books, CDs, and stuffed animals. "It's going to be a little longer than he thought."

"When's he coming?" I ask, no sense of impending doom yet.

"This Monday," she says, and slices into another carton.

Monday comes and goes. He doesn't show up. My mom tries to reach him, but the phone at our old house has been turned off, his cell phone message center is full, and at his office there's a recorded message to leave a message. We go about setting up the house, pushing the furniture into place, filling the kitchen cabinets with our dishes, pots and glasses, and the food we buy at a supermarket called Publix. No A & P around here. At night after dinner my mom and I sit on the couch in the living room watching TV. We don't talk about it, but we're both going bonkers waiting for my dad to come. And eight days after he was supposed to be in Florida the phone rings and, like magic, we inflate with the news that he'll arrive in two days.

That night in my new room I lay in bed thinking that I won't do anything to screw this up. I'll stop hassling my mother, get better grades in school, help more around the house, and try my hardest to like our new home. I count the hours until I'll see his blue Toyota in our driveway.

Two days later, I'm blowing my hair, trying desperately to straighten out the frizz that's puffed my head into the shape of a lopsided balloon, so I miss the sound of car doors slamming. I shut off my hair dryer in time to hear the doorbell ring. I run to be the first to see him, but my mom is already there, and she's smiling like the time they bought me my red ten-speed. Not only is my dad standing in the hallway, so is Jessica. I almost die of surprise. My parents planned it, to cheer me up and all. But it was my dad's idea. So cool.

Jessica and I stash her suitcase in my room, and change into bathing suits. We go out through the kitchen door, and I can tell she's really impressed with our pool. It takes up almost all of our yard, and it's beautiful. Rimmed with bright yellow tile, the sun twinkles off turquoise blue water. Our two palm trees are pretty scrawny and don't give much shade, but we slather on sunblock, and jump into the pool like two little kids. Jessica's going to stay four whole days. Suddenly the air doesn't feel like a sodden weight all over my body. Life is perfect again. This heat, this scorching sun, this strange place, they've all become acceptable. I wish she could stay forever. We plop onto the lounges, and I see my parents through the picture window in the dining room. They're sitting at the table talking. I'm not crazy about the expressions on their faces, but I push that worry away. Nothing can go wrong on a day like this. We lay on our backs and talk about Tyler, about the kids back home, and especially about Nicole having sex with a junior at Cliff High. My fear dissolves into the sultry air.

Back in the house later that afternoon my mom is making dinner. She's talked about this meal for days: fried chicken, mashed potatoes, peas, and gravy. She makes the best chicken, a million times better than KFC, and that's saying an awful lot. She's usually really happy when she's cooking, buzzing around the kitchen like there's nothing she'd rather be doing, which I don't get at all, but different strokes, right? That day though she looks like the life's been sucked out of her. Maybe she's trying too hard to make a perfect meal.

But she stays like this all through dinner, hardly says a word. My dad makes up for her silence, telling jokes, and complimenting her food like mad. Jessica and I finish fast and go out for a walk. It's still hot as blazes outside, but we're okay. We walk eight blocks to a Seven-Eleven and buy ice cream cones. Back in front of our house, the lights are on in the living room and I can see my parents screaming at each other. I hope Jessica doesn't notice, and instead of opening the front door with my

key, I press down hard on the bell. My dad opens the door, a big smile on his face. My mom stands a few feet behind him also smiling. It's like they've started a new chapter before finishing the old one, but it's fine by me. I hate when my parents fight. It really makes me feel sick.

The next three days go fast. Jessica and I keep pretty much to ourselves. It'll be a long time before we see each other again. The day she leaves I sit on my bed and watch her pack. I can't imagine how I'm going to get through my first weeks at a new school without her. Like a puppy, I follow behind her into the front hallway. There's a taxi waiting outside. Sometimes, I admit, I can be pretty brain dead, and right then it occurs to me that my dad didn't drive down in his Toyota like he was supposed to. He came on a plane with Jessica and, from the looks of it, he's flying back. He stands near the door, a suitcase on the floor next to him.

I must have looked confused, freaked out, or both, because my mom quickly says, "Your father has to go back for a few days. For work. Everything's fine."

I can't say I believe her, but I want to. I look at my dad.

"Don't worry, baby. I'll be back next week. Come give me a hug."

I walk over to him and lean into his chest. I grab for his hand. He holds my small hand in his big one, and for a minute I'm safe. I don't ever want him to let go, but too soon he says, "Got a plane to catch, pumpkin." He kisses the top of my head.

I walk outside with them and watch as the driver puts their suitcases into the trunk. Jessica gets into the cab; my dad looks so handsome as he winks at me and blows a kiss. My mom stands in the doorway, her face paler than usual. When she catches me looking at her, she raises her hand to wave good-bye to them, but the expression on her face doesn't change. I've never seen her so sad. Seconds later they're gone, and she's no longer in the doorway. The heat and humidity press down on me. How quickly everything has changed. I know he's not coming back.

I blame my mother. It has to be her fault. If only she were funnier, or prettier, or smarter. What if she were a lawyer, or a doctor, or an actress? Would he leave us then? I blame myself too. I think of everything I ever did wrong, going back as far as I can remember. The time I spilled grape juice on the beige carpet, the teacher who called my parents because I talk too much in class, every test I ever failed, the night Jessica and I stole three beers from her parents and got totally drunk

(though they never did find out about that). There's no shortage of my past failings.

We move again. The new house is too expensive for us to keep. We sell it, and stuff what fits into a two bedroom apartment in the same school district. It's the kind of building that looks like a motel. Two salmon-colored stories circle a small pool, there's no elevator, and everyone shares a laundry room with a Coke machine on the ground floor. I make a friend there. Gail lives alone with her mom too. She makes it easier to go to school, but I'm in no mood to keep my promise to get good grades. I make a new deal with myself; the goal now is not to fail, to get by. Somehow I'm able to do this. My mom works. She taught herself to type, and got a job as a secretary in an insurance company. Every night she comes home and makes dinner. Every Saturday morning she cleans the apartment, and in the afternoon we go food shopping. She never complains, never says a word about my dad, but she's frozen in misery. I'm not much better. It's like we're both in walking comas.

A month after we're in the apartment, I wake up on a Saturday morning and head toward the kitchen. My mom is whispering to someone on the phone. Like a deer caught in headlights, I stand against the wall in the living room and listen.

"You met her at the block party last summer. The pretty blonde. She lived two houses down from us," she says.

I know my mom's talking about Lois Green, but I don't know why. A voice inside my head tells me to go back to my room, but I stay.

"Ruth said it's been going on a few years. I guess no one wanted to be the one to tell me. I only found out last week...I should have known."

Known what? I wonder. My heart pounds so hard I think it will fly out of my chest. I know I should stop listening.

"He's been living with her since we left Willow Street. This move to Florida...he needed us out of the way." My mother is crying now.

Barry Green's mom. My dad is living with Barry Green's mom. Maybe it's a good thing we don't live in our old house anymore. I would die from humiliation.

"I should have known," she says again. "If I did we would have moved someplace else in Jersey. God, Carol, it's been so hard for Allison here, without her father, and so far from her friends. It kills me to see her like this."

So that's where my dad's Toyota is, parked in Barry Green's

driveway. I picture it in front of the Greens' red brick colonial where everyone can see it. How could he do it? I think I am going to vomit.

"I can't believe he came up with the idea to bring Jessica with him just so I wouldn't scream and carry on when he told me he was leaving me. The whole time he kept saying, 'Keep your voice down, Jessica's here.' And it worked. He knew I'd keep quiet with her in the house. He said he didn't love me, that he hadn't loved me for years. He never said anything about Lois Green, never said there was someone else."

I walk into the bathroom we share and stare in the mirror as tears drip down my face. A few make their way onto the Bon Jovi T-shirt I slept in. I dry my face with a towel and brush my hair a really long time, then pull it back into a ponytail. For the first time since he left I think about my mom, about how awful it's been for her too. I walk to the kitchen, listening near the door first to make sure she's off the phone. She stands at the counter mixing pancake batter. She turns and forces a smile. I go to her and hug her really tight. I want to cry again, I want to scream so loud my lungs will burst, I want to crumble into a heap by her feet, but I can't let her know what I heard, not now, not when she feels so bad. I pull away.

"Pancakes," I say, with every bit of enthusiasm I can fake.

"Blueberry pancakes," she says, looking almost hopeful.

There'll be lots of time to talk to her about what I heard. I have so much to think about, so much to figure out. But in that little kitchen, sunlight streaming through the window, I realize there's something I no longer have to question, something I am sure of. There's one person I can count on, and she's standing right next to me.

Holland and Normal

South of the university, I'm grown up and gone,
driving with my sister down Normal,
deep in the college ghetto

where houses used to have gardens, cut yards,
school buses stopping for kids and dogs
and Big Wheels.

We're backroading to the park because
she wants to see how I'm living,
and I stop like the sign tells me
where Holland cleaves Normal like a blade.

See? Holland and Normal do meet, sometimes,
I say. We laugh.
Because mom is a Holland again.

The divorce finally final. I remember the time
I got sick, right after dad left, and mom said
I would just have to go ahead

and die, and my sister remembers dad's fist
aiming itself at her, sees our mother turning away.
A kaleidoscope of desertion.
We stop laughing.

I wish I hadn't said anything, because it's fall,
trees bursting like fireworks
and everyone soaks something in regret.

But that kitchen's closed, cartoons are over.
The future slicked back its hair, knocked on the door
a long time ago to take the children away

with vows of home early, sleek car sharking
down a street ripe with play, and we couldn't wait
to turn the corner, refusing to look back
in an ecstasy of good-bye.

Feel Good Drag

My uncle revs the Charger's engine,
the chassis rocking, smoke filling
the cabin from gargantuan joints
passed from his pinched fingers to eager
hands and mouths standing outside the car.
Everyone cheers for him, racing
some fool from Camden trying to score
a bag of weed. Hordes of teenage
girls blow kisses—especially the blonde
in Daisy Dukes, hot pink bikini
top and matching heels, a green
bandana raised above her head,
ready to drop like a guillotine.

I stand near her at the finish line.
It's 1987, I'm six,
hiding behind her tanned legs.
My uncle called this babysitting.
They're all high as the cumuli
pacing like cotton snails across
the oily sky. Cold Buds are dealt
like decks of cards, and hash pipes
are handed off to the soundtracks
of *Slippery When Wet* and *The Wall*—
everyone on the backs of angels,
watching Black Monday and Iran
smoking in the charred terrain below.

Those afternoons bursting with risk:
souped-up muscle cars speeding,
tires burning down forsaken highways;
the feel good drag of fleeing into
the fleeting love of high school friends

and sycophantic one-night-stands;
the lure of peril, mortality—
does he remember it like this?
Can he recall the same beauty
from the safe locale of middle age?
His youth the stuff of small town legend,
extolled in bars and class reunions
where one's past is what one is.

Bird, Bath, and Beyond

We hear it before our afternoon nap,
A scratching in the walls

Like mice scurrying
Or a phantom branch

Dragging in the wind two stories up,
Where no trees reach.

From outside we see
A shingle has fallen away,

Exposing the opening
For an old stove pipe,

Dead ended by plaster
on the inside. A bird

Has made her nest
in the hole in the wall,

A cliff dweller bathed in
Sunlight more generous than any

Cast in last July. From below
We see her beak protruding

from the tall plane of shingles,
her profile's bob and jerk

As she holds sentinel.
Back inside, we rest

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Our heads against the plaster,
The bird in the wall.

Beyond October, it is hard to say
If safety will remain in unlikely places,

But in our hearts
We hope it will.

Chinese Poetry

Her eyes are so large.
Her breasts gently sway forward
as she leans toward the table to write.

She sits in a booth alone.
The coffee remains quiet as she composes
line after line in note cards.

As I read Chinese poetry
we see each other in our simple acts
and yearn to touch.

This space between us
continues to shrink as we say nothing
and quickly look away.

Bamboo fires blaze in the distance,
the river captures red and gold on its surface,
her hair is cut straight across her forehead.

Cathedrals Are Not Built by the Sea

after Wallace Stevens

Not where sand nor sunlight lays waste to
the shore is where we build
monuments to wind.

How very close the varicose veins of
morning move here and
away from the waves. Waves wanting
to partake in the sacrament of the sacred
and the profanity of walls.

Safe in the hidden hills posterity sleeps
in a gargoyle-protected sanctuary of rock.
Where no wave wears away steps or the words
behind heavy old doors. As if
Sodom had come here in search of the Sphinx
never learning to swim.

Now the hush of water safe of salt
comes down on little heads far from
the mystery of source. Far from
danger lurking in the dark shadows behind
waves.

Where within walls is the crashing
isness of the element furthest from the flames?
The cleansing shroud surrounding
a virgin body of heat --

The tide moves away from the moon.
Creeps undetected as an army would creep an inch
further up the coast.
Moving inland like a turtle knows
where to lay its eggs. Moving in the midnight
against the shores.
Against the pagan sacrilege appearance of sunlight
and the violence of cathedral doors.

THOMAS RAIN CROWE

This Ink Is the Earth
for J.

This ink is the earth.
Brown wet water.
Dark as skin that even the night
won't take away like a thief
looking for jewels.

This earth I stand on
is in the ink.
The run-off of melted bones.
These words are how the
ink and the earth make love.

I am the earth.

You are the water.

I am the paper.

You are the ink.

And under silk sheets of language is the sex.

If you are a red horse
then I am a black bird. A dark moon
hidden behind the eye's lashes in trees.
Meanwhile, the *a b cs* of seriousness have
stolen the blues. Have read, writ, and 'rithmetic'd
the blush right out of my smile. Brainwashed the earth
from giving up clay.
What can I say?
That it's OK or that *ss* shouldn't rhyme?
You're all mine.
Wherever there are plowed fields of shadow
moving in dreams and
your eyes are my memory of ink.

Women of a New Creed

Open and willing vessels are what we are,
So that our minds, bodies, and souls may not stray far.
Drunkenness in the spirit is maintained so we may set a bar

For those who see God in us
To the point they're too anxious to stay hushed.
We're so contagious that those who come near feel the rushing gust
Of the Holy Spirit that reigns within us so much.

An addiction is what we would like to call it,
We are anointed and fixated on Him in every bit.
Those who remain obedient to His word, amongst us they will fit.

As women of a new creed,
We have no expectation of acknowledgment for our good deed.
Our only prayer is that God makes can shine through and sow a seed
In the women who will become part of this ministry
And join us to feed spiritually those in need.
We will continue to be submissive as long as God continues to lead.

Ordovician

The river where I'm digging is lined
with limestone that falls from the ledges
like so many plates.

There is the shelf that holds the fossils:
trilobites, brachiopods, cephalopods
and crinoids. I use a rock hammer
and a trowel. It's like finding a hit in
a stack of records or a favorite slide
from the carousel.

I wash the muck from the fossils as best
I can. Then I sit on the river bank and look
at my finds. It's late afternoon and trout
break the water, trying for the rising insects.

When I get home, I'll soak the fossils in
vinegar overnight. A few days later, I'll
put them on a shelf next to the driftwood
and agates and rock sculptures.

The remains of my life.

Blood Loss

Like Leviticus,
the list of who beget whom is
so endless it numbs my brain.
I choose to focus on one:
Tugalo, the rascal.
He of the river,
he of the pranks,
he of the fiddle
and moonshine
and mule plowing deep into
share-cropped, strawberry-pungent,
sweat-soaked, Southern soil.
He whose laugh-faced life was
cut short
by a poorly (or, perhaps, a well) aimed
shot in the dark.
He whom I never knew
but do so long to have known.
Oh, Grandfather, we would have been
such very good friends.

Glass

Nobody knew why Josh wore those elbow pads every day except for me, and I wasn't about to tell anyone. Not when people made fun of him, and called him names—and not even in the middle of Parker Street, when Tommy Wilson, who was probably a whole foot taller than me, knocked me over into the dirt. I wasn't telling a soul.

"Come on, Roger, we know he told you," Tommy said, two of his goons kneeling at my shoulders, holding me there. "What, is he retarded or something?" I didn't say anything.

Tommy stood over me and for a second, I thought he was going to spit on me. His throat clenched and unclenched, like a snake trying to swallow a mouse that was still fighting. But all of the sudden, he said, "Come on, guys," and they all got up, dusted the dirt off the knees of their uniforms, and scattered.

I turned around, still sitting. I'd had my hand over my eyes to block the sun, but I realized that I didn't need to—my brother, Harry, was blocking it for me.

Harry was six years older than me, and in high school. He was quiet, and a good student, but he played football—the kind of guy you would want for an older brother. He reached down to help me up, the leather of his letterman jacket shiny.

"Kid, you've got to be more careful." I dusted myself off, and he turned around to walk home. I walked right next to him, trying to keep up.

No one ever said Harry and I looked alike—Harry had a square jaw and blonde hair. He had square shoulders. He looked like a toothpaste advertisement when he smiled, and a sneaker advertisement when he ran. The best way to describe me, really, was just to say "the opposite of Harry"—but with even more freckles.

When we got home, it was quiet, and I knew that meant there had been a fight. "Hey, kid," Harry said, "Why don't we go outside? Play catch or something?" And I knew what he was trying to do, so I went, even though I didn't like to play catch. At least Harry never threw the ball too hard at me—once, when my dad was playing, I missed the ball and broke a tooth. It was a baby tooth, but it still hurt.

"So are you seeing Mary again this weekend?" I asked. Harry smiled.

"I don't know, Rog. She's really pretty and all, but I get the feeling she's not really interested in me, she's interested in the captain of the football team."

"You are the captain of the football team." I missed the ball, and had to go chase it. "Catch" was always more like "chase" for me.

"You'll understand what I mean when you get older," he said.

"I'm tired of waiting to finally understand things," I said. "I want to know now."

Our mother was standing at the back door, and her hair was down. She never wore her hair down during the day.

"Boys, come on in. We need to have a family meeting," she said.

Family meetings, at least in our family, were always bad. The last time we'd had a family meeting it was because Zippo, our dog, had been hit by a car.

We sat in the living room for almost ten minutes before my dad came downstairs. He spent most evenings in his office upstairs—in fact, he worked so much, and so often, that my mom moved one of the couches from the family room up there so that some nights, he could sleep in there.

"Kids," he said, "Your mother and I—"

Harry closed his eyes, but lightly, like he was going to sleep. When I didn't want to know what came next, I closed my eyes a lot harder than he was right now. I held my breath.

My mother interrupted. "We're leaving town for the weekend," she said. "Your grandfather is sick, and we need to go take care of him."

Harry opened his eyes. "How sick?"

"He's in the hospital," Dad said. "We don't know how long he'll be there, or how long we'll be gone. But we've been thinking."

"We trust you guys," Mom said, "so we're leaving you two alone. Roger, I expect you'll follow any rules Harry sets." She turned to Harry. "And of course, we've got rules we'll leave behind. But I think you both know how to behave."

I could tell Mom had been crying, but it didn't really shock me. I don't know when that became a normal look for her. "We'll just play it by ear," Dad said. "But we'll call you every day around four—after school—and we'll expect you to be here and answer that call."

"Absolutely," said Harry. "That won't be a problem." He was smiling.

"We're going to pack," said Mom. "We're leaving tonight."

And with that, the whole family erupted into movement, like bees in a hive. Harry followed Mom around while she told him instructions for what to water when, and what to feed me, and how to reach them at the hospital if necessary. Dad was throwing things in suitcases in his room, and I just sat on the couch, waiting.

I barely knew my grandfather. I didn't know if Harry knew him well or not, but he hadn't been around much since I'd been born. I remember that, when I was very little, he called me "Ug," and I figured out later that stood for "Ugly." I'd never really liked him.

My grandfather lived in Tupelo, Mississippi. My dad used to sing a song about it some nights after dinner—he'd stand behind Mom when she was doing the dishes, and sing, "Come on, write, write, write me a letter—send out a letter by mail," and she'd answer back, "Send out a letter in care of the Tupelo County Jail." And Harry'd laugh. I didn't really think it was funny, but I'd laugh, too, sometimes.

"Kiddo," Harry said, "Come here a minute."

He was calling from his room, and I hurried before he changed his mind. He always said his room was private—and he wouldn't go in mine, either. And neither of us was allowed in Mom's room, and really, even she wasn't allowed in Dad's office. Our house was made up of a bunch of privacy joined by hallways.

"If you listen to me, and you're good the whole time Mom and Dad are out of town," he whispered, closing his door behind me, "I'll tell you a huge secret. The biggest one of my life."

"About what?"

"It's a secret."

"How do I know I want to hear it if I don't have any idea what it's about?"

Harry smiled. "You drive a hard bargain. OK, kiddo, I'll tell you a secret about me. Something no one else knows. Something that would drive Mom and Dad both crazy." I could feel my eyes get wide. "OK?" he asked.

"Why do I have to be good to hear it?"

"That's how I'll know I can trust you. Because just because they're leaving me in charge, that doesn't mean we're not a team—we

have to do this together. And once I know I can count on you, well, then I can tell you my secret."

It's weird to go to sleep in a house where half of the people who live there are gone. Usually, when I went to sleep, noises kept me awake—a tree branch scratching at the window, Dad's typewriter keys clicking—but after they left, I figured out that the silence was much scarier. I stayed up until the numbers on the clock on the wall were blurry.

The next day at school, Josh came up to me, elbow pads and all. It looked like he bent his elbows, put some kind of hard plastic around the joint, and then wrapped it over and over with bandages from the hospital. It was way worse than just having to wear glasses, or even braces, like some really unlucky kids had to wear.

I used to hate when he'd come up to me in the hall, because talking to him was like having a cold; kids just stop coming around. But after a while, he was the only guy still coming around, and it was OK for me to just be happy to see him.

"Roger," he said, loud enough that more than one person turned around to look. "Hey, wait up."

He had a shuffle to his walk that always reminded me of the bands on American Bandstand and Dick Clark—he never picked his feet up all the way, so he slid on top of the floor, but there was some kind of rhythm that no one else could hear.

"I've been thinking about this weekend."

"What's happening this weekend?"

He looked at me like I was crazy. "My parents are going out of town? You were going to come over?"

"I forgot. My parents are out of town, too. My grandpa's sick."

"I'm sorry."

"It's no big deal," I said.

He looked down, and then looked back up at me. I realized he was probably sadder than I was. I was looking forward to getting the house to myself, and to spending a little time with Harry.

"Don't worry about it, OK? It's fine."

"So we can't hang out?"

"Harry'd kill me." And then I thought for a minute. "Wait, maybe you can just come spend the weekend with us."

Josh was the only eleven year old I knew who was allowed to stay home alone when his parents left town, but they always had strange rules for him. He wasn't even allowed to be on a sports field if a game was being played, but as long as he was reading or watching TV or something, he was allowed to stay home with no babysitter. In some ways, he was actually the coolest kid in school, but no one had noticed yet.

"Are you sure?"

"I'll have to ask him."

But it was OK. Harry helped us unroll a sleeping bag on my floor. We watched TV and ate popcorn while Harry said he was working on homework upstairs. He spent a lot of the night on the phone, but he kept his voice to a whisper.

"What do you think he's talking about?" Josh asked.

"I'd settle for knowing who he was talking to," I said.

Every once in a while, I'd hear a short beep and know he'd hung up. But ten minutes would pass, and I'd hear the same low whisper coming from his room.

"We should spy," said Josh. "If we hold a glass up to his door, we should be able to hear everything he says."

It was a good idea, and we tried, but Josh couldn't hold it still long enough. His arms are bent at a near-ninety degree angle at all times, and it made holding while listening difficult. I tried to hold it and let him listen, but nothing worked. I couldn't hear anything, either, but I figured it was because my heartbeat was so loud in my head. I was relieved when Josh suggested we just go back to the living room.

We'd been watching some Kim Darby horror movie, "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark." Josh said there wasn't anything really scary about it. He chewed his popcorn with his mouth open, and in between discussing whether short hair was cute on girls or not, he makes fun of me, whispering "Roger, Roger, Roger," like the demons in the movie.

"Shut up, Josh. You're being stupid."

He laughed. "You're the one who's scared of something on TV."

I didn't really have an argument against that. "Oh, what, so you aren't scared of anything?"

Without looking away from the TV, Josh said, "Oh, yeah, I'm scared of Tommy and the other boys at school. I'm scared they'll figure

out about my elbows, you know?" And I watched him shovel buttery kernels into his mouth, almost like he was tossing them into a wastebasket. He had to use his wrist to flick them into his mouth. I'd been around Josh so often that the way his movements were restricted didn't seem weird to me anymore.

"How does it feel?" I asked. Finally he turned away from the TV and looked at me.

"How does what feel? I don't know any different."

"Can I see them?"

And maybe it was just that we were on our own, without parents, or maybe it was that he finally trusted me, but Josh began to unwrap his elbow pads. He peeled off two elastic bandages before he even came to the plastic. He had a circular piece at the corner of his elbow, and when he undid the second bandage, it fell to the floor—and that's when I saw them for the first time.

They were clear, and completely see-through. When he first told me that his elbows were made out of glass, that you could break them as easily as you could see through them, I didn't believe him. And nobody would have, until they saw them, just like I was. The first time he told me, I was sitting with a few other kids at lunch, and when he came and sat down, they left.

"I was just trying to enjoy lunch," I said, grabbing my tray to leave.

"If you stay, I'll tell you a secret," he said. "A big one. One everyone wants to know."

Then he just said it, that his elbows were made out of glass, and that he had to be really careful, or they'd shatter. That's why he always moved like a robot, and that's why he wore elbow pads and bandages at all times. His joints could shatter at any moment.

"I don't believe you," I said.

"I didn't think you would," he said. "That's OK. I told you. And now you have to let me eat lunch here."

Now, in my living room, I was amazed. I moved to touch it, and it was cool and smooth. "Can you feel that?"

"It's glass, but it's still my elbow," he said, "I can feel it a little bit. I can't move it at all, though. My mom used to cry every day because she was so afraid I'd get hurt."

"My mom worries every time Harry plays football," I said, and he smiled.

"It's kind of like that. But it's a bigger deal. If I get hurt, it's forever."

"I would think it'd be easier. Once, Harry broke his leg, and he was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. But I broke a vase once—" and then I pointed at it, still sitting in the middle of the table—"and I just glued it back together."

"Roger," Harry yelled from upstairs, "Mom's on the phone."

Josh started wrapping his elbow back up. "Well, at least you'll finally get to hear the conversation."

Josh stayed at our house for the rest of the weekend. We went outside, but neither of us could play catch. We couldn't ever seem to agree on something to watch on television. By the end of the weekend, I was really ready for the house to start being full of creepy noises again instead of conversation.

"What do you want to do now?" Josh asked.

"I don't care," I said, but I meant that I wanted to be alone for a few minutes.

"We could go get some lunch."

"I'm out of money," I said.

"I've still got some of the money my parents left me. Come on, let's go."

When he first told me about his elbows, I thought he was lying, and it didn't change anything. But now that I knew he really was that fragile, I was on high alert all the time. Everything could potentially shatter his arm. I kept trying to think of all of the times I treated him like he was normal, even though he told me he wasn't. All the times I could have really hurt him.

I didn't say anything, but I guess he could tell what I was thinking. "Stop worrying so much."

By the time we got to Parker Street, I'd already freaked out when he tripped over a crack and when a dog came from out of nowhere to sniff us. But I'd forgotten the biggest threat of all—Tommy Wilson.

"If it isn't Mary and her little lamb," he said, motioning at us.

"What does that even mean?" Josh asked. "I mean, you have all day to come up with something, and that's the best you can do?"

Tommy's smile turned sneer and he lunged for Josh, pushing him a little. Josh's whole body stuttered, rubber-soled feet scraping with little resistance over the concrete.

"Hey," I said. "Just leave us alone. We aren't bothering you."

"You're always bothering me," Tommy said. "Stupidity bothers me. Ugliness bothers me. You guys have the market cornered."

"That's a little funnier," said Josh.

"Shut up!"

I grabbed Josh's hand and went to cross the street, but he jerked away from me. "Stop that. I can stand up for myself."

He shot me a look full of anger, or fear, or something horrible. I wanted to push him myself. I'd been trying to be friends with him since that day in the cafeteria—since he made me be his friend by telling me his stupid secret. And I hadn't even really wanted to know in the first place. But ever since then, he'd been following me around, and inviting himself over to my house—and I'd had enough of it.

"Fine," I said, walking across the street. "You're so strong? You deal with him." I turned to run home.

The last thing I heard before Josh hit the ground was Tommy laughing.

Grandpa died on that Tuesday, and Mom and Dad decided to stay in Tupelo for a couple more days to get the funeral arranged. Harry stayed locked in his room, quietly talking on the phone. I liked to pretend he was talking to the President about how to once and for all get rid of the Russians, or maybe he was on the phone with Kim Darby, telling her to get out of the house before the demons finally consumed her, even though I was pretty sure he was just talking to Mary, or some other girl from school.

"How do you get a girlfriend?" I asked him while we were brushing our teeth.

"I don't know, kiddo. It's pretty easy. You find a girl you like, and you ask her."

"What if you never find a girl you like?"

Harry smiled. "Then it gets more complicated. But you will." He spit. "Hey, what happened to that Josh kid? The one who was over here this weekend? I haven't seen him since Sunday morning."

I gulped, because I'd been trying very hard not to think about what happened to Josh. "I don't know," I said. "He hasn't been at school."

Harry shook his head. "Poor guy. You want to go check on him tomorrow evening? Maybe you could bring him his homework?"

But I didn't really want to know. I didn't want to know if his arm was a stump that looked like a broken beer bottle. I didn't want to know if it hurt when he hit the ground, when Tommy Wilson put his knees on his chest and beat him up. I already knew. I'd been that kid before. It hurt.

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm sure he's fine."

The next afternoon, Harry walked with me to Josh's house. When we got there, his mom answered the door and said he couldn't come out and talk to us, not even for a minute. And he really didn't feel up to visitors, but she'd tell him that I came, and she was sure it meant a lot to him. I was sweating and embarrassed, because I figured she knew that I was the reason Josh got beat up.

"He's really tired, and he's got a lot of recovering to do."

Harry stepped in. "That's awful—what happened to him?"

"Playground scuffle," she said, "But he's kind of a fragile kid."

Harry shook his head knowingly. "I hope he's feeling better soon. Is there anything we can do?" He poked me in the back. "Roger brought his homework."

She forced a smile. "Thanks, Roger." Taking the stack of papers in my hand, she said, "I'm sure you guys have done enough."

As she was closing the door, I asked, "When will he come back to school?" But I don't think she heard me.

Thursday night, Harry came into my room and told me that Mom and Dad would be back by the time school was out on Friday, and that the week had gone really well. He thanked me for being so helpful, and he ruffled my hair like usual.

"Seriously, kiddo, I couldn't ask for a better brother. And hey, I always hold up my end of the bargain."

"What bargain?" I asked.

"I promised I'd tell you my big dark secret if you were my partner this week. And you were awesome, even while your friend was over."

"That's OK," I said.

"No, a deal's a deal."

I looked at my brother. I mean, really looked at him. Even when I looked really close, I couldn't find a flaw.

I shook my head no. "I don't want to know," I said. "I don't want to know any secrets."

"Are you sure?" he asked. I couldn't tell if he was confused or hurt.
"I like things the way they are. It's easier," I said.

He shook his head and said, "All right, kiddo. Get some sleep. I know Mom and Dad are going to need a lot of help the rest of the week, because they're going to be really tired."

I nodded. "Goodnight, Harry."

He turned the light off, and I listened to the fan blades whip through the still air in my room. I bent my elbow, over and over, seeing if I could wear out the joint, but I couldn't. No matter how fast I moved it or how hard it snapped, I couldn't wear it out.

Handshakes

Handshakes, hi-fives, keeping it cool,
it was you and me.
You, with your angel-blue eyes of optimism,
me and my bohemian browns,
we watched the world swim by all around us
and did nothing.

Erode

After swimming lessons, we were always rewarded
multicolored lollipops that had a chalky texture
and would mix with chlorine coating our soaked lips,
cutting our throats with its fine-grained sugars.

One day while nibbling the orange top off my lolly,
a splash came over the outstretched sucker, and
I jumped to see who had ruined my afternoon treat,
only to spot a lifeguard pull a girl up from below –

blond-haired and blue-faced.

Dropping my lolly to the cement, it snapped at the neck,
and I watched as a stream rushing from the motionless
girl's green one-piece drown the eroding sugars,
spilling over with an orange tint into a nearby drain.

The Road to Jackson, Wyoming

Somewhere between North
Platte and Laramie, I abandoned
On the Road for our road,
Kerouac for the winding
Hoback River, Dean Moriarty
for Lodgepole pines off Highway 191.
In Bridger-Teton National Forest,
among high hills, snow, and sunflowers,
the car falls silent, turns towards
our first dusk in northern Wyoming.

This Side of March
for Anne Marie and Jack

Inside the bones, inside
the ground, light taps memory

of light. All the Aprils of life
slip out of night, each stays

longer than the day before
as if wind has been humming

a song without lyrics, then words
appear. Birds fly up, trees

gather them in. Bees hang
in the air, little globes.

Stones in the path hold sun through
the dusk. Wine in the glass

goes down in pink glow, smooth
and musky as time. Marrow

and dirt twine crocus with snow.
You're winter, and then you are

spring that swings in the heart,
makes of it a cradle.

Home

Is where you don't
get a cell phone until
you're sixteen, and you only
get one then because you never
know when the Jeep might die.
So you learn to drive with both
feet, but never park under
the pines in winter. They
got shallow roots and like
to fall on power lines, so you
keep the blue Maglite
beside the bed. Put batteries
on the grocery list and make sure
it's all there, cause Walmart's
half an hour away and we
ain't going back. Always
keep a loaded gun ready
and, in a pinch, the Maglite
will work, too. Don't trust
lawyers, doctors, or politicians
cause they're all in it
for the money and money
may buy a house, but it
won't buy a home.

Scatter, Scatter

(*A Double Abecedarian*)

After the night you ranked me below jazz
but before the morning I sent you away,
calls from friends and notes in my in-box
disappeared. It was then that I knew
even Coltrane wouldn't do. Nazarov,
finessing trombone in silky impromptu,
gilded strains of funky sax man Garrett,
however sultry, couldn't make you less
inscrutable in my eyes. No, I need no partner
jaded to major chords, scoffing at the p & q.
kept prisoner by a jaunty beat. Give me no hip
lover with smoky aspirations, aesthete Virgo
musing on Davis' grays & blues, beholder.
Now, sunburst yellow! Lipstick red ad infinitum—
open a window! Let howling cats out to prowl
past the fence, beyond the hills and not come back.
Quaffs of fresh air revive me no lesser than a hadj.
rousing me to dance the macarena. But then I
spy your old saxophone, forgotten in the rush
to silence your finger snaps. It's now lying
unclaimed, this rusty prize, and hey, I'd as lief
venture into hell as take it up myself. After three
weeks of waiting, I'll prop it in the window, 3-d
x-marks-the-spot, in case you wax quixotic,
yielding to the cool Siren's Song, and succumb,
zigzagging back across your chic scattering sea.

Burned All Winter

Logs wouldn't do so we tried hearts
which caught fire quicker than we thought,
unleashed a flame all of us could hurt by,
consumed by jealousies of old lovers
skating on frozen lakes hand in hand
with new husbands or boyfriends,
or cuddling with them on huge beds
entombed in their satisfaction, love
warming them more than furnace heat.
We wanted to remove our hearts
but our pincers started to melt
each time we put them in the fireplace.
All of us would have to bear it
until we could learn to retrieve the ashes.

Ash Wednesday

She found a parking space half a block from the church, but she knew it must be crowded inside from the cars slanted along the street at least a dozen deep on either side. She hurried past the iron gate of the playground where the Catholic students in their school uniforms screamed and ran with delight during nice weather. But today the unrelenting rain splattered everything, darkening the stone walled edifice of the school and shattering its reflection in the puddles beside the gate over and over as she walked past.

She paused before the stone steps leading up to the church, trying to clear her mind, determined that this beginning of the season of Lent would mean something beyond the accommodation of old habits, that her faith would be reawakened, although her belief in the Church had not altered one jot since childhood. Three years had passed since she had first moved to Raleigh, and four years had passed since her husband had left her lying in a heap on their bedroom floor, though even now his presence still directed her emotions, speaking to her like the remembered words in a dream. She had never annulled the marriage, so by the immutable laws of the Church she was still united with her husband, whatever the state of New York had to say. The brief promise of married happiness that was now unfulfilled swallowed her days, and she lived completely in the ever after of her disappointment. She held on to the memories of her marriage in the same way that the Church holds on to its images of hell and damnation — that they might be quickly paraded out whenever the flicker of an outlaw hope appeared.

She walked up the steps, pushing back the hood of her jacket as she grabbed the iron handle to open the door. It occurred to her that she had not been inside the Sacred Heart Cathedral since she had turned thirty, but she blamed her lapse on Stephen, her new boyfriend, who was not Catholic and barely Protestant. She would bring him with her the following Sunday, she devised to herself, if she didn't give him up for Lent, which was something she had so often, in her mind at least, threatened to do.

The sanctuary was quiet, just as she had hoped. Her plan was to time her arrival so that the service itself would be over, and she could quickly receive the ashes before hurrying back to the florist where she worked, hopefully without the majority of her coworkers realizing that she had left the building. She had tried that morning to remember a year when Lent had begun on Valentines Day, but it must have been long before she first went to work arranging flowers. It was an unspoken rule that no one left the building on Valentines Day, the busiest day of the year, except the drivers delivering floral arrangements throughout the city. Food was usually brought in for those whom did not leave the shop, and they ate at their worktables in an act of deference to the one true god of commerce. But Roy, the head florist, had promised that he would get Linda out of the building in time for noon mass. He wasn't Catholic, but he knew her sad story.

She crossed herself at the fount, her hands gliding over the blue cloth of her already soaked jacket. But when she turned to enter the sanctuary, she saw a long line of penitents filling the aisle. There was nothing to do but take her place in line. She stood on the tips of her toes trying to see over the heads of those in front of her, looking for Father O'Connell. She sighed with relief when she saw his familiar head nodding over those who kneeled in front. She immediately reached into the pocket of her jacket for her rosary, but it wasn't there. Had she lost her rosary? It was a present from her grandmother, and she panicked before remembering that she had placed it on her bed table the night before. In the predawn darkness and in her hurry to pick Stephen up for work that morning, she had forgotten to take it with her.

The line was moving slowly, and she began to fear that she would be away from work too long. She passed the time staring at the stained glass windows, now so dim in the sunless day, with the rain pattering behind them where water had collected in the stone casements. By her standards the Sacred Heart was a rather small church and didn't compare to the cathedrals where she had attended mass while growing up in New York. But the windows were lovely even without sunlight, with moments from the Bible pieced together cleverly enough in the windows' designs, but she could remember seeing much better windows, real artistic expressions of Christianity. She missed the community of faith she had left, with its Christmas masses whose services seemed to leave no aspect of her life untouched by the spirit and unity of the Church. But

she knew that this smaller church mirrored perfectly the reduced expectations that now possessed her. She was barely aware of the austere sadness that had settled over her daily routine.

The line began to move more quickly. In a few minutes she would reach the end of the aisle where the line turned by the altar rail, and she could hear the low intonation of Father O'Connell's voice: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It seemed to her that Father O'Connell was almost doddering, and his slow, lachrymose movements, though still practiced and unhesitant, were now forced by his age into efforts of will. She lowered her head, staring at the thin carpet beneath her feet as the relentless rain reached its crescendo outside the stone walls of the church, and shivering slightly in her wet jacket, she wrapped her arms more tightly around her.

One more kneeling row and it would be her turn. She felt that if she could only promise true penitence she would receive a new and absolute rebirth of faith, and in her desire to feel within herself ample sympathy for the power of her faith, there arose in her mind a horrible image from her past, and she suddenly saw her ex-husband again in all of his fumbling rage. She erased this haunting image by carefully considering how she had tried over and over to get her future husband to attend the pre-marriage counseling offered by the church, and how he refused to show any interest in her faith before or during their married life. She had been reduced to attending mass all alone, dreading to return home to whatever new situation her husband had created for her and with no higher intention than to torment her. And yet never during her entire married debacle did the church ever intervene. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling for the expected movement of the person standing next to her, which would be her cue to move down the aisle toward Father O'Connell.

But without being aware of herself, she found suddenly that she was kneeling along with the others. She kept her head down, passionately following the slow movements of the priest whose actions, after her long years in the church, she could foretell. Father O'Connell moved from left to right, imposing the ashes upon each slightly upturned forehead, aided by a young priest who provided an urn holding the mixture of burnt palms and oil. "This is it," she thought, "this is the moment when I rejoin the Church and become whole again," and she had to stop herself from muttering this thought out loud.

She heard Father O'Connell's familiar words as the woman beside her received the ashes upon her forehead, a woman about Linda's age but married, because Linda had noticed the woman's ring. Linda raised her head slightly to see Father O'Connell reaching back to the young priest standing by him as the old man loaded his shaking thumb with ashes. And then he turned slowly back to her, hesitating before saying to Linda in a voice somewhat louder than before, "Turn away from sin, and be faithful to the Gospels." She felt the wet marks of his thumb crossing her forehead, but she felt more deeply the chastening effect of his unexpected words. Had he changed his instructions just for her? Had he been changing them all along? Was he confused? But before she could consider her answer, the group she was in stood up to leave.

They walked in single file past the empty pews, and she hurried past her fellow parishioners, some turning momentarily to make the sign of the cross as they left the sanctuary. She wanted to get out as quickly as possible, not only to get back to work at the florist before anyone resented her absence, but also to escape the experience of Father O'Connell's words, which still rang in her ears. She pushed open the heavy wooden door, pulling the hood of her jacket over her head and well past her exposed forehead to protect the ashes from the slanting rain. She could feel the crossed marks tingling her skin.

She hurried down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, glancing down the street to where a Chinese restaurant's neon signs flickered in the rain. She remembered suddenly going to lunch at this restaurant with Stephen, and she realized why Father O'Connell had spoken those chastising words. The church was telling her to turn away from her relationship with Stephen. She was appalled by the idea that the church community was judging her for what was her private life, but she was also secretly thrilled that they felt strongly enough about her to seek to impose their will. It was a slap to her as an individual but at least it was the slap of recognition. 'Besides,' she thought, walking to her car, 'isn't Stephen just like my ex-husband, an unbeliever?' The door to the enclave had opened for her, and she would have to let Stephen go, at least for the duration of Lent. If he were really as serious about her as he claimed to be, the following forty days would stand as a test of his strength as well as hers.

She felt more certain of herself as she drove her car the dismal six blocks back to her work, and the familiar buildings that she passed

were curiously shrunken beneath the dark rain clouds gathering overhead. She ate crackers as she drove, wondering to herself how little she could eat and still sustain her energy for the busy afternoon ahead. She parked her car behind the building, and looked around for the van that Stephen had picked up at the rental center that morning, but it was gone. She was relieved she wouldn't have to see him just then, but she knew that he would be planning to come to her apartment after work since it was Valentines Day. She ran toward the glass doors of the building just as a clap of thunder rankled overhead and a new deluge of rain began hitting the metal roof of the dock. She laid her wet jacket and pocket-book on the chair beside her worktable and walked over to the retail side of the store. The morning rush had dissipated, but she knew that by late afternoon husbands and boyfriends would be lined up outside the doors to buy bouquets of flowers on their way home from work. She walked into the bathroom and looked at the ashes on her forehead. Even Father O'Connell's shaky hands had successfully made the distinct outline of a cross. 'Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return,' she intoned to herself in her mind in Father O'Connell's voice, hearing at last the words that spoke to her of penitence but which she had somehow missed receiving. But the idea of returning to dust, husbandless and childless, a life of vacancy, sent her mind reeling. 'The church can give you comfort, but it can't give you a husband, or your own child,' she thought. Was it possible that Stephen wasn't the problem but the answer? She spent a moment listing in her mind like some private litany the more dismaying aspects of their relationship: the fact that he was several years younger than her, a college drop-out, his moodiness, his appalling lack of faith. She reflected sadly that it would be better to give him up. But when she looked into the mirror again, she saw herself looking older than she had expected, and she realized then that the years she had lost now resided in Stephen, but she was still resolved to let him go. And as she pushed open the bathroom door to return to work, she consoled herself by telling herself that it's better to have a deeper faith than an unasked-for commitment.

But the floor manager was waiting for her at her worktable. She let Linda walk behind her desk before shaking a stack of new orders at her, emphasizing the need for quickness. Then she turned her gaze toward Linda's forehead.

"What do you have on your forehead?" she asked incredulously, and then she suddenly reached up to wipe what she thought were only specks of dirt off her skin.

"No," Linda cried out, backing away from her reach. "That's from the church, from the priest!" she warned her.

The floor manager gave her an odd look and threw the orders onto the table before turning on her heels and walking away.

Roy, who was Linda's usual champion in these matters, was nowhere to be found. Linda was surprised to find herself crying, wiping the hot tears away as they fell down her face. With a great swoosh of sound from the deepening downpour outside, the glass door opened and Stephen filled the empty space, staring in Linda's direction before putting down his empty crate to hurry over to her side.

"What happened?" he asked her, sliding his arm around her waist without thinking, but she moved out of his reach.

"Nothing," she said, the tears still spilling down her face. "Just forget it, I've got too much work to do."

"I see you made it to the church," he said, glancing up at her forehead. "I'll see you tonight, then?" he asked her, even though they both knew he would come by on Valentines Day. Linda sensed that this was her chance.

"It's just too much tonight," she told him, moving him out of her space as she reached across her worktable to pick up the orders her manager had thrown down. "I'll be too tired."

Stephen walked dejectedly away. How could she help him understand her situation? Only minutes later, just as she was about to begin work, an older man who had been hired for the day to deliver flowers approached her table. She recognized Ted from her church and knew that he was an active member. She imagined that he was an emissary for those whom might be looking askance at the undisguised fact of her relationship with Stephen.

"I have a favor to ask of you," Ted whispered, "but I don't think now is a good time since you're so busy. Would it be okay if I stopped by your apartment later - just for a few minutes?" he asked her, pulling off his hat and then pushing his white hair back under it as he slid the hat back over his head.

"After seven o'clock is fine, but just for a few minutes. I'll be tired after a twelve hour day," she told him, laughing in spite of her tiredness.

Ted smiled. "I'll see you after work then," he told her, and he walked away from her just as Stephen turned the corner. Stephen didn't look up at Linda, but as he carried another cart of flowers out the door to load inside his van, she could tell by his movements that he was angry.

By eight o'clock, Linda knew that she had made a mistake. Stephen refused to answer her repeated phone calls so she realized that everything between them must be over, but since they had to work together she thought she would walk over to his apartment house and smooth out any bad feelings between them. The rain had ended, and sparse black clouds glided across the tremendous three quarters moon that had risen above the bare limbs of the trees. One moment she could see nothing before her on the sidewalk, and then suddenly the moon would reemerge, tunneling light down the long avenue where she walked. In just a few minutes she arrived at his house. The door, as usual, was unlocked. She climbed the wide stairs up to the second floor landing to Stephen's door, dreading along the way the foul mood he would be in, but she was determined not to take into account any anger on his part. Had she not told him over the few months of their relationship her entire story? How could she be certain how much he had comprehended? He was too inexperienced to hear some of the details of course, but she thought he had understood that by not annulling her marriage she had set the bar even higher for whoever eventually would truly become her husband. "He might not even be home," she thought to herself, half hoping in her exhausted state that she wouldn't have to see him.

She knocked softly on the door of his room and though she heard no noise, she could see a shadow cross the space between the floor and the bottom of the door. Stephen unlocked the door and opened it slightly, offering her a stony expression that she had not seen before. She found herself inside the room without actually deciding to enter, and Stephen closed the door behind her, taking his seat in an old rocking chair with his back to her. Linda put her hand on his shoulder, crossing in front of him to the narrow space in front of the rocker and crouched down to bring her face to his level.

"I've been walking outside in the darkness," she said suddenly, her face pinched with sadness as though she might begin crying at any moment. "And you know what, I don't really care what happens to me – there's nothing to look forward to anyway."

She took Stephen's hand, assuming his sympathy, but he barely

acknowledged her presence and she could feel his fingers going limp beneath her own as the seconds passed.

"Ted came by for a few minutes," she found herself unexpectedly explaining. "I only told him to come by because I thought it had something to do with the church," she added.

"What did he say?" Stephen asked, swallowing with great effort as if some thought he had turned over and over in his head had just dropped down into his throat.

"He had a box of candy for me," Linda told him, laughing. "I told him thank you and sent him away. His wife is dead you know," she added.

Stephen shifted in his chair, still avoiding her eyes, and the rocker slanted forward in her direction, but Linda stood up to leave. 'If he can't follow my lead now,' she thought, 'then this is all a wasted effort.'

"Would you like me to put the kettle on for tea?" he asked her, suddenly rising out of the chair and walking around his room with uncertainty like a confused, elderly man. "Oh, forget it," he said, "I'll walk you home if you like," he muttered, looking for his coat.

"I can walk home in the darkness alone - I'm a big girl," she told him. She waited in silence for him to find his coat, impatient with his lack of tenderness and found herself feeling suddenly tired of everything.

Back at her apartment she made them cups of tea, but kept the room dark, with only one small lamp lit on a corner table near the door. They sat at the kitchen table, stirring their tea bags inside their cups, still overcome by the sudden awkwardness between them.

"A strange thing happened at mass today," she began to tell him, opening herself up to him about Father O'Connell and his instructions for Lent, but before she could tell him the details, he interrupted her.

"Did you receive communion?" he asked her.

"No," she told him. "It's Lent, it's the beginning of the forty days before Easter. I'll receive communion on Sunday."

"You mean the morsel of mercy that slakes all fury?" he asked her, giggling.

Linda didn't laugh. She always resented his insolence towards her beliefs, especially since he didn't seem himself to believe in anything.

"You shouldn't make fun of things that you don't understand," she told him. "There's no sense into it."

But Stephen only laughed at her, amused by this phrase that she had heard her father, who was a retired steel worker, use all of her life.

"It's the beginning of Lent today," she told him. "Every Catholic has to give up something for Lent. This year I'm giving you up for Lent. At least then you'll have your freedom to do whatever it is you want to do," she told him, flicking her words into the air like someone flicking a cigarette into the street.

Stephen was silent. She half expected him to get up out of his chair and leave. Didn't he want his freedom after all? In their silence, the ambient light coming into the room from outside the windows seemed to dim, and she wondered if another storm was coming. But before she could finish her thought, a small cry erupted from the corner of the room, and when she turned to Stephen to ask if he had heard the strange cry as well, she realized that it had come from him, sitting there with one hand covering his face as he wept.

She stood up and walked over to him, pulling him closer to her, wrapping her arms around his shoulders that still shook beneath her. She knew then that she would not give him up for Lent, not for forty days, not ever, or at least not until he too decided to leave, faithless man that he was. When his sobbing had ended, he lifted up her sweater and began to gently kiss her breasts, and she endured his confusion, convinced that she would have no difficulty in making the true nature of their new relationship clear to him. She took him by the hand and led him into the hallway, and when they paused to kiss at the entrance to her bedroom, the moon emerged from behind a cloud and cast a slant of light upon them, but she didn't allow herself to believe in the possibility of its significance. And when the slant of light had faded, swallowed again by a passing cloud, or perhaps undone by the simple passage of time across the night sky, they walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Marks on the Floor of the Ruritan Club

What Indiana Jones will find these hieroglyphics of
cowboy boots shuffling
to Conway and Loretta?

What British Museum will speak for
the nervous man who stammered,
"Jen, care to dance?" What cold glass

will encase the way she turned
her bare shoulder and,
without breaking stride, pretended not to hear?

Memories

Upon our first meeting,
I knew there was something about you.
Unmistakable chemistry, a black hole
that sucked me in.

Your relentless approach and
charming conversation made me uneasy.
Goosebumps, effervescent heart
and gastric butterflies were ever-present.

You made me notice sweet sunrises
and crisp autumn breezes;
I'd parade my Cheshire cat mug all day,
simply thinking of you.

You made me want to forget who I am;
values, high standards and all.
"Just put your integrity on the shelf,"
yeah, it crossed my mind.

You made me want to tear down my
walls of solitary ease and timidity;
to let down my hair, live life
and be wholly free.

You had a way of making me feel special;
cherishing each embrace, I got lost in your arms.
I was on your mind, and that is
all that really mattered.

Your decade of experience created
a bridge between the two of us.
A bridge I wasn't ready to cross; cluttered with
complexities, emotional obligation and fearfulness.

COURTNEY N. KING

Now only these memories remain,
like the charred wood and ash of Silent Hill.
So let me reminisce, and
imagine what could have been.

Uninvited Lady Bugs

They skitter in as if every window
crevice hadn't been weatherproofed,
dozens follow dozens like dotted
detectives searching the study
for clues in a convoluted plot.

My office is haunted by a chaotic
crowd of aphid-eaters who have trespassed
into this garden where I'm king.
They invade the perennial photos
on the walls, climb leaves and vines
of Venetian blinds.

A few besiege the flowering
bookcase and computer monitor,
mate like tiny turtles on the run
while others attack the printer,
scrawl cryptic comments over the ceiling
and occupy the light fixture.

couldn't care less about
sidetracking my focal point,
hindering me from earning my keep.
Why don't they hibernate
under tree-bark, look for cracks in rocks?

They secrete a sour odor, play possum
as I corral them in a container,
take them to the outside garden,
hoping they are messengers carrying wishes
that come true, ferry sound weather,
good fortune, peace.

Coosa River

Cruising down the Coosa River
on the Roman Holiday riverboat,
I gaze into the water's cold eyes.
A great blue heron glides

on an air current and spears
a fish with lightning speed.
The smell of sulfur rising,
a quiet rhythmic exhalation

of liquid breath, cracked sunlight
sparkles like silver on ripples.
A zigzag of wind sprinkles
golden and crimson leaves.

We pass under the arched bridge
and travel the route steamboats
took during the Civil War.
Myrtle Hill Cemetery covers

three hills. Stars climb with
a crescent moon and flood
hundreds of white crosses with
the ghost light of light.

Being a Monster Is Not Easy

Being a monster is not easy.
You have to get up every morning,
sharpen your fangs and make
sure your fur or scales are good'n tough.
Gotta be able to deflect pitchforks or torches.
Hoes, they sometimes use hoes.

You can't have a house in town.
No running water for you.
You've gotta be on your toes,
Or hooves, or whatever.
Always have a biting remark ready,
just in case you've got to keep quiet.
Do your shopping at night.
Tend your fence, or moat, or wall.
Don't let anybody in your bog,
and avoid eye contact
unless you must scare a pesky friendly person.
In that case, make faces and noises in your
throat or near the back of your throat.
The noises are important as
that usually gets 'em.
Roll your eyes, drool some, too,
or just glare really hard and say nothing.
Let your claws do the talking

Funny thing is that monsters don't
hurt anybody, usually.
Sometimes they'd like to.
Usually don't, despite the shouts at their faces
and whispers behind their backs.
Monsters have quick ears, you see.

They need them to survive.
Monsters learn to ignore the words of others.
Mostly.
Or the they just sit in bathroom stalls
and sob, wishing the villagers would carry
out their threats and end the tears.
But not often. Not often enough, anyway.

The thing is, if you can keep the villagers
away, you never have to hurt them
or answer stupid questions.
Questions like "How are you?"
or "How's your day been?"
Questions they never really want answered
and shouldn't have asked to begin with.
You see, monsters are scared inside.
That's why they hide in dark places,
because no one can see you.
It's a good thing that we, er, you, hide
because, after all, monsters are scary.
Right?

Above Kloppenheim

I'd have set that pace had I walked these hills
Two thousand years ago.
When bridges over Rhine and Main
Were set in Roman stone.

But age or era was of little matter,
Something in the here and now
Took its course: I entered a place
Where time hovered,
Unwilling to plant its feet.

It was then that gravel and weed
Formed indifferent shapes;
Shadows of pear and apple merged;
Names for things like me,
For streets I'd walked,
Fell away.

I can't fully return from that newfound place.

Beginning then, regardless
Of how it might seem, to be
Has meant no longer being bound
To where or when.

That One Song

You were a rock-star in the 90's,
but now struggle to play over
the screamed small-talk of the
crowd and raucousness of
breaking bottles.

They only come to hear
one song, and tonight
you'll play that song while
making a to-do list during the verses,
as women aged thirty-something
dance, pound Coors Light
and remember exactly what
it felt like to be 21.

Close Enough to Touch

I leaned against the fender of Buddy's 1970 Ford pickup, waiting for Pa to finish whatever vent he's decided to use tonight to delay us.

"They never." Pa spit expertly toward a beetle climbing a weed stalk next to the porch steps. I watch the poor bug stagger under the load of spittle and tobacco juice as it crawled away. Pa announced his next proclamation. "If we was meant to go to the heavens before we was finished with this earth, then the Lord would've made arrangements."

"Sir, John Glenn did orbit the earth. It is well documented." Buddy was always polite to Pa, even when he argued with him.

"What do they call them? Astronauts? Mighty fancy word, you ask me."

"Astronaut is right, sir. A sailor of the universe." Buddy leaned against the fender beside me, as if he could go on with this conversation forever. "Those men circled the earth. They really walked on the moon. And more will go."

"It's a government hoax," Pa answered back. He crumpled his empty beer can and tossed it toward the overflowing trash barrel. "A swindle to get more tax dollars."

I don't know why Pa worries about taxes. Far as I know he never worked enough to pay any. Mama, when she was still with us, was the one who worked.

Buddy shook his head, like his saying any more to Pa would be wasted energy. "Come on, Fay. Let's go."

"You be careful with my little girl," Pa yelled as we climbed in Buddy's truck.

"Yes, sir," Buddy answered.

When we reached the top of the mountain Buddy spread a blanket on the ground under an apple tree. The July night was so still I could almost hear the clover growing along the path in the orchard. Fireflies lit the lazy summer air with their blinking lanterns, as if signaling to houses in the valley below. Buddy talked all the way up the road about the moon landings and the astronauts who were in the space craft. Now he lay back and gazed at the sky.

Our Brushy Mountains aren't really very high, just little spur-fingers making that last ripple off the Blue Ridge before stepping on down to the North Carolina Piedmont. It's apple-growing country. The perfume of ripening fruit in the orchard seemed to lift me up, to send me spinning and flying inside myself.

I leaned back on my elbows and peeked through the tree branches. The moon looked like a great round of cheese that Mr. Eddie, the butcher down at the general store, had in the meat case. If I stretched my hand up, I could grab a chunk and eat it with soda crackers, like Pa did for a snack. I wondered how it would taste with cold cider to wash it down.

"I know they walked up there," Buddy said. "'One small step' whether your father believes or not."

"Buddy, you can't win with Pa. He don't trust the government in any form. If it isn't the space program, it's the welfare system or worrying about Mr. LBJ pulling the ears on his hound dogs. Pa don't think you should mistreat animals. Unless, of course, they're cats. Pa don't like cats."

"I want to go."

"Go? Go where, Buddy?"

He lifted his right arm up, his fingers straight out, pointing tall toward the tops of the apple trees. "The next frontier. The moon. Maybe to Mars. On up into a million galaxies that stretch so far we can't even see them from here."

He brought his arm down and turned on his side so he was facing me. "What do you dream about, Fay?"

"You."

He bumped his forehead gently into mine. He'd come back to earth and I thought he was getting ready to send me moon walking with his kisses, sweet as an apple plucked ripe from the branch. Instead, he sat up and looked at me for the longest time, almost like he was memorizing something. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft. "Fay, this is hard to tell you so I'll just say it straight out. I'm leaving tomorrow for the Air Force."

"You can't go away," I shouted. "You love me."

"I love you, but I'm going."

I beat on his chest with my fists until he grabbed my hands and held them tight. "I have to go, Fay. I have to see if I can touch the moon."

He left the next morning. I cried for weeks.

In his own way, Pa tried to comfort me. "If God wanted people on the moon He'd of put 'em there. It's a trick, that's all. That Buddy's a right smart boy. Soon as he realizes what's going on, he'll be back."

The words didn't help. And Buddy didn't come back.

So I sulked, watched hours of soap operas, let the trash pile up in the trailer, the dishes grow mold sitting in the sink.

"I'm glad you decided not to keep going to school," Pa said. "You finished high school. That's enough. Never saw much good in all that 'higher' learning folks talk about. Never did think that community college over in town was worth much."

"Why, Pa?"

"Well, they call it a community college. What's the community of a small town got to offer." Pa wasn't asking a question. "I do wish you'd get off your butt, though. You ain't looking after this place like your ma would've done. You use to know how to do stuff around here."

"You're kind of hard to clean up after," I answered.

"Don't sass me, girl." He turned off the TV and headed toward his room.

I stayed up and washed the dishes. The kitchen sparkled when I finally quit and stood back to inspect my efforts. I knew that by the middle of the next day the work wouldn't show.

Thanksgiving week I drove Pa's old truck down to town for groceries. A light snow was covering the world with swirling patterns. I remembered a time from last winter when Buddy caught a flake on his tongue and swore he could taste each icy point. "That one is vanilla, Fay. There's a chocolate one." He gummed, like an old man with no teeth. "That's pistachio. Now there is nothing like pistachio ice cream, Fay!"

We had laughed so hard I slipped and fell in a drift the snow plow had piled near the curb. Buddy fell too, flat on his back with arms outstretched, to make an angel. When he got up he drew in a silly face and swished around the angel's head to make a halo.

"Oh, Buddy." I sighed and shook my head, trying to rid my mind of memories. I made myself get out of the truck and walk across the street. I pushed open the door to the butcher shop. The warmth dried the tears streaking my face and my voice was shaky as I asked about a turkey.

"You were the prettiest girl, Fay. Like your mama, may she rest in peace." Mr. Eddie's eyes searched my face. "You're looking more and more like your daddy, now."

His words rocked me to my soul. I cared about my pa, but I sure didn't want to be like him. He'd sat down when Mama died and he was still in the chair. No, I would not act that way.

As soon as I'd bought the turkey I headed up the street to Sadie's Diner. It was coming up lunch time and the place was in a frenzy. Sadie was at the cash register, smiling a welcome, chatting with people coming and going.

"Sadie, can you use some extra help?"

"Fay, I surely can. When do you want to start?"

We settled on my coming to work on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. I drove on over to the edge of town where the community college had opened its new administration building the year before. The girl in the office was glad to give me a catalog about courses.

My heart was so raw I didn't think it could ever heal. Everywhere I looked there was a reminder of Buddy. How I was going to change I didn't know. But I would not become a loser like Pa.

By the end of January I'd settled into working at the diner and going to business classes. Money was so tight I'd stop to pick up a penny if I saw one on the sidewalk. Pa muttered about neglect, but he didn't actually come out and complain till about the time the apple trees were scenting the air with blossoms.

"You ain't never here," he started.

I was folding laundry. I'd washed the sheets that morning before I went to work, and hung them on the lines that stretched behind the trailer. Now I held a pillow slip to my face and breathed in the clean fragrance of mountain air and apple trees.

"You ain't never here," Pa repeated. "You galavant all over town and Lord knows where else. You got a new fellow you keeping company with? If you got a new fellow you'd best bring him home for me to check on, you hear?"

Real slow I folded the pillow slip and placed it on the growing pile of clothes. Real slow I sat down opposite Pa and looked him in the eye. Real slow I said, "Pa, I do the wash and cook the meals. I clean the house and keep the yard. I work at the diner and go to school. I pay the bills. I tell you about my day, when you'll listen. You got no cause to complain about me."

"But you ain't never here!" He pounded a fist into his open palm with each word. "I want you here."

"I come home every night, Pa. I can't do any more than that."

We settled into an uneasy truce. He wasn't going to change.

The next week a traveling salesman who ate at the diner left a five dollar tip. As soon as the lunch rush was over I walked across the street to the Kurl 'n' Kut and got my long hair trimmed out so short it was almost like stubble on my head. Mr. Eddie at the butcher shop was the first to comment on my new appearance. "You found your smile, Fay. You're looking like your mama again."

I leaned over the counter and kissed him on the cheek.

So, after a fashion, I got my life together. I finished up my two years at the college and got a job with Mr. Carter, who had his attorney's office over the dry goods store. I got so good at the job he starting sending me to court till the judge called him on it.

"Fay's good, Carter," the judge said. "Better in preparing papers and being ready for an argument than you are. But she can't practice unless she passes the bar."

I could have told both of them where I learned to win an argument, but I kept my mouth shut. I just wrote extra notes for Mr. Carter and made sure all his papers were ready when he had to go to court.

On Saturdays, when Sadie was busiest, I waitressed for her. On one of those days Harold, an old school friend, came in for the meat loaf special, came back every Saturday for two months, and finally asked me out.

"Bout time for him to ask," Sadie said. "Harold's a good man, Fay. It's also bout time for you to get on with things."

That was more than thirty years ago. Tonight I sit in a different trailer, cinder-blocked up on the high side of a Brushy slope. My husband has gone to town to play pool and probably to get drunk. Just as Sadie told me, those long years ago, Harold is a good man, but his dreams don't take him very far.

Pa is sleeping on the couch, exhausted from his arguments about the newest government scam on space stuff and old men still telling lies about flying. He doesn't for one minute believe John Glenn ever flew in space, the first time or the second time either. I tune out Pa's snoring.

My eyes search the pictures on the TV screen. I've read every word I could find, all these years, about the space programs. I've scanned the lists of astronauts. I've wept for those who didn't get off the ground and watched in horror when things went wrong and crews died. I've rejoiced with the successes. I knew exactly who I was looking for on this flight. I've been called a groupie. Pa calls me crazy. Harold doesn't comment.

I grip the edge of my chair as the crew files into view. They wave to the cameras. The last man, the oldest person in this group, puts his right arm straight up, fingers pointing tall toward the sky.

"You did it," I whisper. "I don't care what Pa says, Buddy. You purely did it!"

Even though the orchard's far away, I smell the sweet scent of apples and taste the meaning of a dream that is close enough to touch.

Blue Ridge Parkway

you remember the place
where the road tilts west
and the tips of mountains
elbow each other
and shove for position

dark and dusky beauties
in muted shades of purple soot
and blue skirt swirls
folded pinned pleated
lined up in a queue
of their own mysterious pageant
vying for validation
as most beautiful
strong and steadfast

chunky mountains
flexing shoulders
elegant with strength
like body builders
oiled and primed
narrow peaks
scarce and scant
noses high and broken at the top

this range stiff
fold upon fold
tucked and starched
with the valleys pressed thin
and this ridge rounded
filled with clouds
water wave soft

smoke signal clouds
hover watch
and float away

this road the only caller
my car reels and swings
now face to face
honest and true
now dos-à-dos
sweet as a shrug
swaying right
swaying left
contra dance couple
in a jig with the hills

i learned when i was four
to loathe the common road

trudging great lakes to chicago
purest snow abandoned
edging the path with debris

cars slogging west
deranged dolphins
with no sense of self

i learned to love the back roads
and the twisting shimmy
of the mountain path

i see the sign that signals my descent
something in me
reckless and wild
shudders and smiles

road worsens next seven miles

Pinedale

In this neighborhood we call Pinedale,
A man wearing rat-gnawed slacks
Sleeps as he clings his paper-bag booze
Between today's crumpled headlines
And dead grass on a dirt lot
While seesaw steps lead
A gray-haired woman
With her shopping cart of dirt-caked clothes
Past the liquor store to shelter.

In this neighborhood we call Pinedale,
A young Hmong man sets
A faded leather basketball
Against the backboard
To win the game for his friends
While a young Chicano who watches
From across the street recalls a fistfight
His uncle got into with *un gringo*
Mere steps from where he stands.

In this neighborhood we call Pinedale,
Sprinklers awaken to keep
The school's grass green
And to offer a much needed contrast
To the faded paint of the buildings
While the sun sets,
Bringing an end to the day
In this neighborhood we call Pinedale,
As it does for the rest of Fresno.

Part of the Way Home

I've meant, for many months,
to get there. The road isn't long,

the route, not too crooked.
I've been in the car, hands

on the wheel, moving down
the street. Somehow, I get lost.

I always get lost.
I've checked the lunar calendar,

consulted the star charts,
to determine the most auspicious days

to travel. I've noted landmarks
by which I will navigate:

the odd church with half a steeple;
the truck stop with the fiberglass cow

atop a one hundred foot pole.
I always mean well.

I know you will not last.
If I could tell you why I hesitate,

I'd be free to travel any road
I choose. I can see the green glider

in front of the garage.
the square bed of vivid red poppies.

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

You, who have always had to be
too patient, wait in the armchair.

The television's on too loud.
You don't hear the phone when

I call again to say I won't be
driving down this weekend after all.

Changing with the Leaves

Warmth once shrouded them in green safety,
a garment to veil skinny arms and
dry cracked skin, hidden broken twigs,
a robe of life that inevitably will die.

But not without a fiery fight.
Colors cry before their robe's cold death.
Trees bear with pride their veil's ending life
as Orion calls them to undress, to reveal

contorted nakedness, to strip away
the green show of past warm days,
to parade a twisted and tangled frame.
Every detail exposed, no blemish blended.

Summer's fine show dried and crinkled
beside roots, crumbled under feet.
Only what is underneath can stand
the loss of heat and light, a skeleton
that endures the lengthening night.

And now I, though growing cold and
covered in warming wool, know that
I must be naked in my clothes, and bear
my own twisted, tangled frame.

For my green show has had its day.

Natural Law

Through my next-door neighbors' window blasts
Schwarzenegger's *Conan the Barbarian* soundtrack.
Flannel shirt taken off, October's waning rays sink
Into my bones. Pink sky grown overcast and anxious
Above the trees, the sun comes back, lets me imagine
And foresee. Though neither neighbor, Adam nor James,
Have children, both embody the finest qualities I know
And live on words in their own order, so I will say them
Like I see them, notice these two magicians stooping
Low beside the manhole, hands twisting in the dark
As the streetlamps blink on and love, like light, exists.

Heart Murmurs

Will my heart stop before two billion
beats like diabetic grandpa Jay,
who worked construction in Hawaii
to build a five room house in Florida
for father's mother and seven siblings?
Dad escaped yards of lumber,
bushels of sorghum to become
a dean of letters and numbers,
but his heart stopped from a blood clot
like his father's before age sixty-five.
I slow my breath in bed
to feel relentless valves
flush cells into my brain.
I sometimes wish this ticker would quit,
punch its time sheet for a final shift,
blood vessels draining into the Styx;
I sometimes want a pump to hammer
Vulcan fires into white-hot capillaries
until apprehensive thoughts
are replaced by a steady throb.

Wednesday

We should have been at work
when the cool January sun
slid its hands through the
upturned blinds, lighting
our squinted eyes and
nestled bodies, breathing
deep the furnace-heated air.
Our faces elated by the
tiny secret, as hidden
as we kept ourselves,
a day tucked and folded
tight as origami, merely
for our own divine use.
Venturing out for food
in the late afternoon chill,
smiling still at our luck—
ten hours before in the wee
morning, we woke to blood
that blossomed into blessing.

The Jar

There it sat, pretentious and bold, resting at the edge of a cluttered, wooden desk decorated with the crude drawings, letters and scrawls of six-year-olds. It watched the class, wax-paper wrapped yellow drops like shimmering eyes, enticing the children and beckoning them toward it. It wanted them to want it and needed them to work for it. It was a distraction, and one not to be reckoned with.

I sat there, eyes focused intently, legs kicking, untied shoelaces slapping at the metal of my chair, wanting nothing more than the contents of that jar. Nothing else mattered but that rounded, polka-dotted glass container. It belonged to the teacher and I wanted it to belong to me. An immeasurable obsession, it was, irrational and confusing, but it was stuck to my brain like spaghetti tossed on a wall. Lemon candies were my favorite.

It was an unspoken tradition in my class for the students to find some way to place their skinny hands in The Jar, scooping up a seemingly delightful-tasting cough drop and heading back to their tiny, messy desks with a smile. If it meant faking a cough, forging a note or stealing while the teacher was chatting with an angry parent on the phone by the door, children would go through it. It wasn't about the contents, but the idea. There was something about unwrapping the paper from that fluorescent yellow, sticky oval that made you feel special. Each crackle of the wrapper signified that you were different. All the other children had to sit, grubby hands grasped around Number 2 pencils with chewed erasers, scratching out their names at the tops of their math worksheets, while you were grinning like the Cheshire Cat, tugging at the twisted ends of your cough drop wrapper and watching intently as the folds opened to reveal your key to temporary happiness. The children would turn to stare, sticking their tongues out in jealousy and secretly loathing the lucky kid of the day.

It was my day. That Friday, I'd have my turn with The Jar. I'd watched and waited for too long, feeling pangs of annoyance as Sara or Casey made their way up to the desk, clutching their throats with faux agony and professing the bad, bad states they were in and their wish for

something to help them feel better. I'd finally slip my skinny wrist into The Jar, know the sensation of having my fingers brush against the carefully wrapped cough drops and taste the lemony goodness. The class would hate me, want to be me, watch me with their piercing eyes. I would be powerful.

Glancing around the classroom, eyes darting back and forth between the colorful, papier-mâché fish adorning the walls, their goggling eyes seeming to stare at me, smiling mouths telling me that they approve, and The Jar, I wondered what I should do. How would I convince the teacher of my need?

Billy sealed the deal for me, opening his mouth and baring his chipped, crowded-like-a-train-wreck teeth, inhaling and sounding a moist, rough cough from deep within his lungs. As I flinched with shock, speckles of his germ-filled spit spraying onto my arm, I knew what I had to do.

It started with a hack. I balled up my tiny fist, pressing my slightly parted lips to my index finger and coughed, a soft, shallow sound not even big enough to cause a stir in the classroom. It was a test, and it failed. I tried again, louder this time, but nothing. It was going to take more.

Pressing my elbow to the center of my desk, I pushed myself up onto my knees, hoping to project the sound to the masses. My lungs expanded to an impossible peak, causing my chest to feel as if it would burst. I inhaled, opening my mouth widely and focusing my attention on the fish that I'd pasted together. Sully was his name, and he was a rainbow fish from Sillyland, an imaginary village below the surface of the sea. He smiled at me, the multicolored scales on his back gleaming in the artificial light of the classroom. He was pulling for me and wanted me to succeed.

As I exhaled into a booming cough, my chest vibrated, lungs shuttered and throat automatically began to feel as if I'd swallowed razorblades. I coughed and coughed, hoping that I was doing some good, praying that the teacher would be taken aback by my sickness and immediately usher me to The Jar. With each outburst, I was on my way to victory, I could almost taste the lemon, feel the envious stares of my classmates and hear the worried cooing of my teacher as she walked up to me, called me "Darling," and asked if I needed to get some water to go along with my cough drop. I thought I was one step away from being special.

Still, nothing happened. My throat was beginning to hurt and stomach was starting to turn. Why wasn't anyone paying attention to me? I took a deep breath, exhausted from my wild coughing spree, and sat back down in my seat. I'd give it one more try, and if it didn't work, I'd know that it just wasn't my day.

Leaning over the edge of my seat, I coughed as hard as I could, grasping the edge of my desk until my tiny knuckles were white and holding on for dear life in order to keep me from falling to the floor. It was a good one. My stomach quivered from it all, causing my eyes to bulge and face to turn red as I gagged. The classroom went dead silent.

Two minutes later I was being led by the arm, freshly painted red fingernails digging into my skin as the teacher pulled me along toward her desk and, to my glee, *The Jar*. It was as if a ceremony was being performed. My classmates were turned in their seats, staring at me with wonder, eyes wide and breath held. It was the ceremony of *The Jar*, a communion of sorts. My hands were clammy and throat was dry from both the intense coughing and my own nervousness. Sweat broke out on my upper lip as the teacher dropped my arm in annoyance, reaching with her ungrateful left hand and snatching *The Jar* away from its resting place on the corner of her desk. The lemon candies rattled, telling me "hello," and that they were excited for me. I breathed a sigh of happiness.

As the lid, *The Jar*'s hat, was removed, a pouch of air escaped, sending waves of a strange smell to my nostrils. It burned my eyes and caused my upper lip to quiver. Suddenly, I wasn't very excited. My happiness reached its peak and nosedived off the cliff, speeding toward the ground at a hundred miles per hour, only to crash and boom at the base. The teacher grasped my small, clammy hand, making me dip inside *The Jar*, suddenly not so wonderful, and fumble around, fingers slipping through the disgusting mentho-lyptus drops.

I grasped one, scrunching my nose in hate and disappointment, and tugged it away, the rattles of the scattering Halls cough drops seeming to laugh at me. It was too late to back out now. The children were staring at me, biting at their tiny pink lips and blinking in anticipation.

The trek back to my seat was horrid. Each scuff of my sneakers against the coarse, blue wave of carpet signified one step closer to the reveal. One, two, three, I counted my steps in my head, squeezing the yellow oval of disgust in my left hand, trying to crush it between my tiny

fingers. It was no use. The mentho-lyptus drop had a hold on me and wouldn't let go without a fight.

My stomach turned as I sat down, opening my pink palm to reveal the small, wrapped cough drop, now sticky and sweaty from my clammy hand. I had to open it now. My toes curled in my shoes, rubbing against the soles and aching to run. I grasped the twisted edges of the drop, taking a deep breath.

Suddenly, the crackling of the wax paper as it was opened was not such a refreshing sound. It was a sound of utter loathing. The children glanced around at me, snickering in their seats and elongating their spines to get a better view. They wanted to see me miserable. They wanted something to laugh at. I reached into the opened wrapper, taking the sticky, slimy, foul smelling object from its bed among the sticky, slimy, foul smelling paper, and pulled it up to my mouth, lips shaking and trying to escape from my face so as not to have to experience the misery. My nostrils burned.

I parted my lips, slipping the cough drop into my mouth, trying my hardest not to touch it with my tongue and refusing to breathe through my nose. It was no use. My taste buds were sent into shock, convulsing and fighting against the putrid taste of menthol and eucalyptus. I prayed that no cough drop flavored saliva would slip down my throat. I'd just allow it to puddle and spit it out when we went on bathroom break. My stomach took up gymnastics, tossing and turning back flips and cartwheels. The roof of my mouth was on fire, the eye-watering taste of the Halls drop licking at it like flames. I was paralyzed.

A drip of tainted saliva entered the opening to my throat, burning a trail all the way down my esophagus and finally dropping off into the pit of my stomach. A wave of nausea hit me like a rock, sending chill bumps all over my arms and legs. By this time, my cheeks were burning and protruding like a squirrel's, causing my jaws to ache and cripple under the sensation of it all. Something was going to have to give.

Quickly, I slid out of my seat, scrambling around in a panic and searching frantically for an outlet to my horror. My stomach rumbled, an acidic sensation began to rise like vinegar poured on baking soda. Confused stares met my gaze, an angry teacher running her fingers through her strawberry hair and catching my eyes, challenging me to a duel. There was no way out.

I dashed toward the door, trampling over paper schoolbooks and Hello

Kitty backpacks. They were details, figments of my imagination. All that existed at that moment was the cough drop and I. We were mortal enemies, fighting for victory. Placing my hand on the cold, metal door-knob, I twisted, shaking with stomach pain, mouth puckering and burning with cough drop juice.

Suddenly, I was captured. Those same red fingernails that dug into my arm, leading me to my doom, pinched into my shoulder, holding me from my escape. I didn't know what was happening. Everything was a whir. I heard the Halls drops laughing at me from The Jar, calling me names. Sully the Fish winked at me cheekily from his perch on the wall.

I was caught, sides aching, vomit rising, cheeks protruding, captured. I could do nothing. I was powerless. Taking three steps toward the center of the room, I froze, shrugging from the teacher's grasp and bending over, vomiting on the floor.

I hated The Jar.

How to Lease a Family

A picnic by the pond
transforming
the weekend

natural surroundings
watching
the sunset

and when a picnic
is
no longer

ideal it can be
transferred
to a

new destination
no
commitment only

the start of
it
all once again.

In the Margin

The night is loud with the living,
Even the maples and the pines
and the lone oak outside
know the noise of moments met without light.

Tonight, not even Vivaldi helps.

"Less is more" I write in the margin
of a paper I grade by candle—
the stars are not waiting, their light
is too far, and no noise can really matter.

Tonight, not even Bach helps.

I read each requiem, each ode, every first
love, first job, first failure, troubles,
angels they question, the fires that haunt,

the screams of mothers, the abuses,
alcoholics and narcotics,
faithless fathers, each in and out—
what can I do? What can I write?

I want to take this stack of work and cast it away,

watch them fly light as butterflies,
bound for sun-filled skies.

I open the bay window as if flight might happen.
But the night is a brisk river, long and loud.

Rain rattles like chains on the roof.

I have a little grammar, some topics
repeating like skipped stones, one open
window, and everything in this whole house
tastes like coffee, feels like a big mug.

Penny Profile

My connection to you is slim as a totem pole,
your gaunt figure, the width of shackles,
the dream I had last night about entering West Point.
My connection to you is slim as a totem pole,
the distance between fingers, a penny, a canoe,
the width of a gravestone and flag
and metal rod it clings to like some dandelion to a stem.
My connection to you is slim as a totem pole,
your gaunt figure, the width of shackles.

Becoming a Writer

Sitting here
staring at this blank page
white, untouched, pure
the cursor
 blinks
continuously blinking.
It taunts me
telling me that I will never,
ever fill this page
and, if I do
with words so meaningless
this blank, white page
will reject them
so pure. So dull and lifeless.
But, somehow my words
seem even more lifeless,
dull.
The cursor whispers,
"You are not a writer."
I fight the urge to give in
to admit that I am not a writer,
retreat.
Escape from this charade,
stop living this lie
pretending to be a writer
 a poet?
Something I'm not.
Or am I?
What makes a writer a writer?
Is a writer simply one who writes?
I begin to type
words come in bursts
not flowing or connecting
just words.

They make no sense
and, I begin to doubt
my ability,
my talent,
myself.

I *must* censor myself.
It's *too* personal,
too opinionated,
too vulgar,
too dirty,
too me.

Keeping everything at arms length.
Delete. Delete. Delete.

I erase the words
start again
on the now slightly-unpure paper
tainted by meaningless words
fragmented thoughts.

Suddenly, the words begin to flow
like liquid

I cannot control myself anymore.
I begin to pour my thoughts, my opinions,
myself onto the page.

The words flow out of me and onto the page
before I can stop them
before I can censor or filter them.

A feeling of freedom begins to overtake me
I lose myself in the writing.

In that moment I become
more than a person who writes.

I become a writer
who expresses her deepest desires,
strongest opinions
in words, in phrases, in sentences
rhyming and not rhyming
with and without rhythm
beat, no beat,
in stanzas or not.
I become a poet.

Winter Picture

In Gaston County, dry January cotton stalks
shuffle in a still breeze, bear bolls
of snow dollops, like fluffed meringue
that depends on a temperate climate. Savor

the miracle treat today. Tomorrow the sticks
and prickly bolls will dance naked again.

Across the field, dusted in white,
a vacant carolina-clay brick building,
gradually imploding on history, slumps

in the crisp wind. The red brick, woven
in a pattern of warp and weft, wears
a shawl of snow, stands cold, idle.

Once a hum of spinning and weaving,
spinners and weavers rolled their bolts
like bees combing hives.

A greedy weevil leaves cotton stalks
stark in the field, vacates the mill,
strips fiber from the loom.

The mill is a still life.

Into the World

In the usual way
with blood and mucus
with sweat and tremors
headfirst into the cold.

Held up
to the sheer white blaze
air shocked lungs
screaming.

Near the familiar heart's thump
the mouth roots,
on the tongue
the body's thin first milk.

Still Her

Last week, while waiting in the dentist's office, I spotted Marty's face peering up at me from grainy black and white photo in *Newsweek*. Below, the caption read: *New York's #1 Pedophile Gets Nabbed*.

Marty—the man I'd known so briefly when I was seventeen. The man I could never blame. And here I was, more than thirty-five years later, looking at a photo of his face in a magazine.

Marty appeared much like his younger self, and the article's author explained that he'd finally been convicted of raping two young women—though he'd confessed to raping hundreds over his three decades of living in New York.

My chest constricted. I put down the magazine, glanced around the nearly empty waiting room, feeling as if I'd been caught reading pornography in a public place. Soon, the assistant called my name; I had my teeth cleaned, and that evening I began to write.

It was 1972, and I was living in Manhattan, enrolled at an unaccredited college "without walls"—one in which students created individualized learning contracts after meeting with prospective teachers. I attended lectures on existentialism at the New School for Social Research, studied with a playwright and theater critic for the *Village Voice*, wrote poetry under the guidance of a Bank Street poet, and took modern dance classes with a downtown performance company. I lived on East 81st Street in a railroad flat, a four-room, cockroach-infested apartment, devoid of natural light. I lived with a roommate, Denise, a stranger, whom I'd found through an apartment-sharing agency. Though we had "hit it off" immediately and I thought we'd become friends, Denise—twenty-eight, an unwed mother who had "adopted out" her infant daughter to her aunt and uncle in New Jersey—botched up a suicide attempt two weeks after I moved in. In fact, I was the one who found her, heavy and stiff, collapsed on her bedroom floor. I don't remember much about that evening, but I struggled to find my voice after dialing 911—almost too terrified to speak. And I rode with her in the ambulance to Lenox Hill Hospital, where she had her stomach pumped. Later, the doctor in charge told me that I'd saved her life.

All this simply to say that I wasn't in a good frame of mind that autumn. As temperatures dropped and leaves blew from their branches, Denise returned to the apartment to recover, and I became depressed.

I was running out of the money saved from my summer job and survived mostly on oatmeal, which I'd cook for nearly every meal. And I couldn't sleep; often that fall, I'd wake, feeling so claustrophobic that I'd leave the apartment at two or three a.m. to walk along the concrete path by the East River. In the distance, I could see Gracie Mansion and tugboat lights as they floated across shining water. I'd wear my green Army parka zipped completely up, with its fur-lined hood extending past my face, and I'd huddle against the cold as I walked north, then south again.

All my classes met downtown, so I spent much time sitting in Washington Square Park. I'd watch the ebb and flow of NYU students, street people, vendors. I met Moondog, an indigent poet and musician, whose death I learned about twenty years later on NPR. I once ran into Stevie Wonder and had a long conversation with him. I also met an African dashiki-clad poet who invited a crowd of well-wishers to the docks to hear him read his work. Though I don't remember his poetry, I do remember him—a strong, big, dark man in traditional costume—reading at the edge of the Atlantic, with the Statue of Liberty behind.

And during this time, at the onset of winter, I first met Marty. He had an average build, a trim beard, and glasses—I think. But, to tell the truth, until I saw his photograph in *Newsweek* I couldn't remember much—only that he approached me and we talked. He claimed to be a psychologist and urged me to speak about my life. Marty must have been in his thirties, which seemed very old to me back then.

One day we chatted at the Loeb Student Center. Another time I met him at the Eighth Street Book Shop. I remember us once walking across Fifth Avenue, between cars stalled in gridlock. But then Marty becomes an apparition—here one moment, gone the next.

Most days, I wouldn't return to the apartment until evening, after a full day of classes. Denise would be in bed, at first lethargic from the drugs she'd taken, and then lethargic from depression. I'd cook for her, help her to the bathroom. She'd wear pajamas all day—Dr. Denton's, with feet and a back panel I'd have to unlatch before setting her down on the toilet. I can still feel the weight of her as we hobbled down the narrow hallway to the bathroom. She'd lean against me while I undid

the buttons; then I'd back her into the tiny bathroom and push slightly so that she'd land on the toilet. I barely knew her. We rarely had anything to say. She needed help, and I was there.

My insomnia worsened during her recovery—as if the strength she needed flowed out of me, into her, and I only had a fixed amount. By first snowfall, I was feeling suicidal, except that I had really stopped *feeling* much of anything. I had disconnected from my emotions and began to lose my sense of time. I stopped writing poems, couldn't write my academic papers, couldn't care about myself. I did the minimum to get by.

One morning, while trekking to the Lexington Avenue subway, I picked up a chunk of glass from the gutter and pocketed it. Later, when I got off at the Village, I removed the glass from my pocket and deliberately cut the palm of my right hand. I had to strike the flesh a few times to make myself bleed. I felt absolutely no pain. And when I finally did bleed, I stopped in the middle of busy pedestrian traffic to watch the thick red liquid trickle from my hand. Nobody stopped to help. Perhaps nobody noticed that a young woman had intentionally cut herself while standing in the middle of the sidewalk and was now staring at her hand as though she wasn't sure to whom it belonged.

Then, one late night, Denise slept and I sat on the rocking chair in the poorly lit front room, listening to the loud argument of the couple next door. Glass broke, furniture crashed. I watched cockroaches stream out of the woodwork, and I considered the idea that people, like cockroaches, scurried around in darkness, needing to feel safe.

It was in this mood that I remembered Marty's phone number tucked away in the pocket of my jeans. And though it was well past midnight, I called him. We spoke for a while, and he invited me to his apartment.

I had to map out the route to his house and walk the many blocks to the nearest subway. But somehow I wasn't frightened to be out alone so late at night, nor frightened to be going to a near-stranger's house. I wasn't anything. I was simply doing.

Marty opened the door and, with a wide sweep of his hand, welcomed me. I hesitated, but only for a moment, then crossed the threshold and walked in. I probably looked distraught. I took off my parka. Marty made me hot tea. Then there's a blur. My next memory begins when I'm lying on his bed, my shirt off, Marty rubbing my back. I feel his hands

reach lower and he's caressing my thighs. Then, somehow, he's on top of me. I don't struggle, but I do say, "I'm only seventeen."

At some point, Marty must have pulled my pants and underwear down. I remained passive, lying on my stomach. Marty told me that what he was about to do was therapeutic and that he was sterile, so I shouldn't worry. I became sexually aroused.

I don't recall the physical act—only that it was soon over and that I felt I'd gotten what I deserved.

Marty quickly became apathetic to my woes. He rose from bed and began to go about his business as if I weren't there. He didn't offer to help me get home nor did he seem worried I'd be riding the subway at four a.m. Without saying anything, I gathered my clothing, dressed, zipped my parka, and left.

I never reported the incident. Shame drove me to silence. After all, I had willingly gone to Marty's apartment, willingly allowed myself to be touched.

During the next month Denise began to recover, and I realized that I needed to leave the city. I made last-minute applications to a couple of traditional colleges and barely finished up my semester's work. When I got accepted to a school with a strong undergraduate program in writing, I packed my stuff and made plans to attend. I never saw Denise again.

By spring, I had declared myself an English major and was studying poetry. And it was then I began to write about my experience with Marty. At first, I wrote as if I were not a victim, but rather someone deserving of punishment—each poem a trial in which I'd find myself guilty. Then, I developed a more fatalistic view, imagining that my encounter with Marty had been inevitable, that we were partners, and that my innocence was something I needed to lose. Later, I saw myself as a victim: Marty was the culpable adult who had taken advantage of me, a vulnerable child.

What I couldn't handle was the ambiguity—my shifting sense of blame and guilt, my inability to understand what had happened. Had I been raped? Seduced? Merely taken advantage of? Over the years, each time I'd write about that winter, I'd begin with some new, inspired understanding, and I'd rush into drafting a poem or essay, only to realize that my new truth was as limited as my old one.

So it was with this history—accumulated as much from the actual rape as from the many layers of writing about it—that I sat down last week to retell my story. Perhaps after seeing Marty's photo, I had hope once again that I could find new insight, sift more objectively through memory, finally let go of the girl I'd been at seventeen.

But nothing changed. Knowing that Marty did to others what he did to me didn't help.

And so for days now I've been struggling with the final paragraphs of this short piece—obsessively writing, revising, striving for resolution.

In some ways, I'm very distant from the girl I was at seventeen. I'm a professor, living in North Carolina, a mother, and a writer, more focused on the present than on the past. Knowing what I know now, I'd never repeat that winter's sad misadventure; I could recognize the problem before it happened, know where and how to find help.

But in other ways, the girl I was has never left me. I'm still her—arriving in hooded parka and baggy jeans at that dingy New York apartment, hesitating at the threshold, but then, always walking in.

Oversaturated Gauze

How many drops of blood
will it take
until the gauze saturates,
needs to be changed?

Maybe it's full,
enough blood shed
from the rift
in the body
of the world.

But nobody sees
the oversaturated gauze,
nobody works to change it.
It's much
too nasty,
they say.

Yet everyone complains
about the problem— bloody gauze—
and sits idly by
waiting for a leader.

While the leader
is invisible,
resting within each person,
waiting to be unleashed,
waiting to change the world.

Seven-Year Itch

No one would mistake us for newlyweds.
We stopped honing the blade years ago,
started assuming the other
would whet it when necessary.
It's not that we no longer care;
it's that we stopped caring to work so hard
to keep the edges keen.

There was a time we might have
lanced our palms with significant X's
and smeared our life-lines together.
Have we reached the dagger's edge,
the point of proceeding or severing,
only to find it's not as sharp as it should be?

We settled in the silence of cozy detachment,
but years require we deepen incisions,
scratch and scrape till we hit bone,
grind our hands till the blood cements.
To pull them apart, we'd need to feel pain—
or something.

In Ether

He is not shown in the photo of his first class
after the war. He must've borrowed a camera
and stood beside the photographer to watch
the box, the curtain, the flash of light to save time.

Down slope from the one-room schoolhouse
the ten girls and thirteen boys don't wear shoes,
the farm kids in coveralls with worn out knees,
the city kids in calico pleats with gold lockets.

You can tell they're well aware of the class
they were born into. It's reconstruction.
No one smile. The exposure is too long.
Most stand with hands empty at their sides.

Most already have the look they'll wear
their whole life. John would've seen this.

One boy in a pale shirt and faded blue jeans
is shorter than the others in the back row.
The schoolhouse's siding can be clearly seen
through the boy, as if he's not really there.

The cast of his eyes, the set of his mouth, missing
due to whatever has made him transparent.
If John were alive I'd ask him about his ghost boy,
if the boy had been there for the photo

or if there was something about the camera
which made the boy slip from the moment
into another, while everyone else remained.

The Doll

The ballroom doll, blond
and blue-eyed, always wore
a silver gown and waited
for royal escort,
waited in a box,
feet secured to cardboard
printed to look like a bricked
path up to the palace.

She waited always behind
a sheet of cellophane,
there beside the tall Philco
radio in Granny's flat--
in the living room,
she waited for my sister:
"When you're old enough
to not tear it up," Granny said.
But it waited for years,
walking in my sister's
dream world, until dolls
were replaced by other things.

"That's just her way,"
Mama would say with a sigh,
but there was nothing just
about the perpetual needling--
Granny telling my father
he was disinherited or, later,
telling me I would get it all.

And the old doll
never got out, she found herself
confined to smaller
and smaller boxes.

while she dreamed of the ball,
made up schemes
to thwart the prince,
to keep the courtiers in place,

until the stratagems fell from her head
like brown petals from a rose,
and she was nothing
but a briar planted in a field
of headstones.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RYAN ASMUSSEN, a graduate of Boston University, teaches English, humanities, and drama at a public high school in suburban Chicago. A former journalist and film critic, Asmussen has written a first novel, *The Englishman and the Butterfly*, and is currently at work on his second. His poetry has been published in *The Isle Review* and *Blind Man's Rainbow*.

BEEBE BARKSDALE-BRUNER has a B.F.A. in painting and an M.F.A. in poetry. She has published one book, *It Comes To Me Loosely Woven* (2007) by Press 53 of North Carolina. She likes to explore media including clay, figure drawing, photography, and her driving force is to understand how diverse media and genres come together—and to appreciate those parallels and overlaps. Barksdale-Bruner is currently working on a poetry chapbook.

SALLY BELLEROSE is a Memere, gardener, writer, and registered nurse. She belongs to a shocking number of groups dedicated to writing, but still does not know if an apostrophe should appear after the *s* in writers group. Her novel, *The Girls Club*, is forthcoming from Bywater Books. Her awards include an NEA, The Barbara Deming Prize, and The Rick DeMartinis Award. Bellerose's work appears in *a call to nursing*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Per Contra*, and many other publications.

PETER BERGQUIST earned a bachelor's in English from Princeton University and an M.F.A. in creative writing (poetry) from Antioch University Los Angeles. He is married with two daughters and is currently teaching English, Film and Academic Decathlon in the Los Angeles Unified School District. His poems have been published in *The New Verse News*, *The Chickasaw Plum*, *The Sylvan Echo*, *The Two Hawks Quarterly*, *The Sea Stories Project of the Blue Ocean Institute*, and *The Queen City Review*. His poem "From Here to There" received Honorable Mention in the Inglis House Poetry Contest and was published in their chapbook *On the Outskirts*. His poem "Red Tide" won second prize and a cash award in the Bay Days Poetry Contest.

JULIE BOUDREAU is a junior English major with an emphasis in creative writing at Gardner-Webb University. She grew up in Waterville, Maine, and often reads her poetry at the Broad River Coffee Company's Open Mic Night. Boudreau enjoys singing, art, and spending time with friends. This is her first publication.

JOYCE COMPTON BROWN is Professor Emerita at Gardner-Webb University. Upon retirement, her colleagues honored her by naming an academic lecture series in her honor. She has recently published several reviews and poems in academic journals and is co-author of a semi-humorous column in the local newspaper.

LES BROWN has published short stories in *Now & Then Magazine* and *Appalachian Heritage*, and had scholarly works published in *Appalachian Journal* and *The Journal of Appalachian Studies*. In 2008 he won first place in the Appalachian Writers Association's Harriett Award short story contest. Les is currently Professor Emeritus at Gardner-Webb University and lives with his wife, Joyce, in Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

SARA BURGE received her M.F.A. in poetry from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and her first book, *Apocalypse Ranch*, will be published by C&R Press in the fall of 2010. Her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *River Styx*, *MARGIE*, *Court Green*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Dogwood*, and other journals.

JEREMY BYARS'S first poetry collection, *Eyes Open to the Flash*, was published in 2008, and he's currently working on his next collection. His poems and reviews have appeared in many journals and are forthcoming in *Verse Wisconsin*, *Writer's Bloc*, and *Welter*.

KEVIN MARSHALL CHOPSON received his M.F.A. from Murray State University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Number One*, *Nashville Arts Magazine*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Concho River Review*, *Black Magnolias*, *English Journal*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *New Madrid*, *Poem*, *The Hurricane Review*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *The South Carolina Review*, *National Gallery of Writing*, and the *Euoreean*, among others. Chopson teaches writing at Davidson Academy and Volunteer State Community College, both just north of Nashville, Tennessee.

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JAMES CIHLAR is the author of *Undoing* (Little Pear Press), and his poems have appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Quercus*, *Bloom*, *Minnesota Monthly*, *Northeast*, *The James White Review*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Verse Daily*, and in the anthologies *Aunties* (Ballantine), *Regrets Only* (Little Pear Press), and *Nebraska Presence* (Backwaters Press). The Books Review Editor for *American Poetry Journal*, he has also published reviews in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and on the poetry site *Coldfront*. The recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship for Poetry and a Glenna Luschei Award from *Prairie Schooner*, Cihlar lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

THOMAS RAIN CROWE is an internationally recognized poet, publisher and translator whose work has been published in several languages. He is the author of twenty books of original works, translations, anthologies and recordings, including the multi-award winning book of nonfiction *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods*, published in 2005 by the University of Georgia Press. As an editor, he has been an instrumental force behind such magazines as *BE ATtitude*, *Katwah Journal*, and the *Asheville Poetry Review*. His poetry-and-music band, Thomas Rain Crowe & The Boatrockers, has been heralded by such icons of the music industry as Pete Townshend of The Who and Joy Harjo of Poetic Justice. As a translator, he has translated the work of such prominent writers as Hafiz, Guillevic and Yvan Goll. His latest book, *The End of Eden*, a collection of environmental activist essays, was published in the fall of 2008. He lives in the Tuckasegee community in the Smoky Mountains of rural western North Carolina.

NIKKI CRUD UP is a 2009 graduate of Gardner-Webb University who recently completed her first memoir, *The Writing of My Body*, which will soon be published. She is a Public Bid Specialist for CDC Publishing in Cary, North Carolina. Crudup currently resides in Raleigh, where she plans to further her studies in African-American literature and women's studies.

KATIE DARBY is an M.F.A. candidate at Southern Illinois University. She has had poetry published in the *Evansville Review* and *Big Lucks*, and fiction published in *The Meadowland Review*. She also writes for the *Evansville Courier & Press* as a freelance music writer.

HANNAH EDWARDS is an English education major at Gardner-Webb University, slated to graduate in spring of 2011. Originally from Saluda, North Carolina, Edwards plans to teach ninth grade English/Language Arts in Charlotte, North Carolina, as well as write fiction.

THOMAS J. ERICKSON is an attorney in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After not writing poetry since his undergraduate days, he began writing a poem while sitting in court several years ago. Since then, he has had numerous poems published and recently had his first chapbook, *The Lawyer Who Died in the Courthouse Bathroom*, accepted for publication by Parallel Press.

JAYNE JAUDON FERRER got her first byline at the age of nine and never looked back. Her work has appeared in publications ranging from *Boca Raton Magazine* to *Christian Parenting Today*, and she is the author of four books, one of which has remained consistently in print for twenty years. During the course of her career, Jayne has interviewed movie stars, judged contests, and scripted everything from power plant videos to beauty pageants. Most recently, she launched [www.YourDailyPoem](http://www.YourDailyPoem.com), a website targeted at people who think they don't like poetry. Jayne lives in Greenville, South Carolina. Learn more about her at www.JayneJaudonFerrer.com.

J. LAUREN FLETCHER is a junior English major with a creative writing emphasis at Gardner-Webb University. Originally from Chesterfield, Virginia, her poetry, nonfiction, and photography has appeared previously *Mindscapes Art and Literary Magazine* and *The Broad River Review*.

ROBIN GREENE is a professor of English and Writing and director of the Writing Center at Methodist University. Greene has published three books—two poetry (*Memories of Light* and *Lateral Drift*), one nonfiction (*Real Birth: Women Share Their Stories*)—and her novel, *Augustus: Narrative of a Slave Woman*, is forthcoming in November 2010. Greene is co-founder and editor of Longleaf Press, a literary press that publishes poetry chapbooks.

SONIA HALBACH is a reformed poet, reluctant reader, and redhead writer. She is currently finishing her bachelor's degree in English and

communications at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. After graduation, Halbach plans to move to New York City to see what kind of trouble she can stir up there. She has been published previously in *The New Writer*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Savannah Art and Literature*, *Emprise Review*, *Chronogram*, *SP Quill*, *Concise Delight*, *Conceit*, *Dark Lady Poetry*, *Amulet*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, *Main Channel Voices*, and *The Taylor Trust*.

JENNIFER HART is a studio art major at Gardner-Webb University. From from Gastonia, North Carolina, she also enjoys working with the art of language. Hart's childhood played a vital role in her formation as a person, and she drew upon those experiences to write the poem "In August."

EMILY HAYES received her master's degree in English literature from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, where she continued post-graduate work in creative writing. She teaches American literature at Carbondale Community High School and is one of the poetry editors for *The Village Pariah*, a new literary journal sponsored by the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum. Her works have appeared previously or are forthcoming in *The Mom Egg*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Big Lucks*, *Bayonet*, *Inkspotter*, *SpiritsArt*, *New Scriptor*, and *Abandoned Towers*.

JENNY HUBBARD, now of Asheville, North Carolina, has had poems published in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Broken Bridge Review*, *The Rambler*, and *Tar River Poetry*. Her first novel will be published by Random House in 2011. Anne Marie and Jack, her next-door neighbors when she lived in Charlotte and the inspiration for this poem, met and married in their golden years. They celebrated their first wedding anniversary May 9, 2010.

BECKY HUMPHRIES is a senior English major at Gardner Webb University. She lives in Lattimore, North Carolina. In her spare time, Becky enjoys reading, writing, and watching any and all things science fiction.

KATE HUTCHINSON teaches English and is Fine and Performing Arts Coordinator at a large high school in suburban Chicago. Her poetry has

appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Sow's Ear*, *Cloudbank*, and *Stone's Throw*, among others. Many of her personal essays have also been published in anthologies and literary magazines.

DONALD ILLICH has published poetry in *The Iowa Review*, *LIT*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and many other journals. He won Honorable Mention in the Washington Prize book contest and was a "Discovery"/*Boston Review* 2008 Poetry Contest semifinalist. Additionally, he received a scholarship to the 2006 Nebraska Summer Writers' Conference and was a semifinalist in the Elixir Press Poetry Book Award Contest. He is a writer-editor who lives and works in Rockville, Maryland.

MARK JACKLEY is the author of four chapbooks, most recently *Lank, Beak & Bumpy* (Iota Press), and a full-length collection, *There Will Be Silence While You Wait* (Plain View Press). His work has been nominated for the Best of the Web Anthology. He lives in Sterling, Virginia.

KAREN KARLITZ'S work has been in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Miami Herald*, *Foliage Oak*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Ranfurly Review* (Scotland), *Iguana Review*, *Babel Fruit*, *American Diversity Report*, *Scribblers on the Roof*, *Miranda Literary Journal*, *Long Story Short*, and the anthology, *Freckles to Wrinkles*, among others. One of her stories won the 22nd *Jerry Jazz Musician* New Short Fiction Award, one was a Glass Woman Prize finalist, and another chosen for inclusion in the 2007-2008 print edition of *The Best of the Foliage Oak*. Currently, she is submitting her first novel for representation and working on a short fiction collection.

COURTNEY N. KING is an English major and sociology minor at Gardner-Webb University, where she plans to graduate in May 2011. She is from Lawndale, North Carolina, where she attends Emmanuel Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, and has the opportunity to write for the church's district newsletter. She also writes monthly pieces for Gardner-Webb's English Department newsletter, *The English Channel*. She has placed in the last two years in the local Erma Drum Poetry Contest and hopes to keep competing, while her ultimate goal is to simply make her writing available to willing readers.

BRUCE LADER is the author of five published or forthcoming books, most recently, *Embrace* (Big Table Publishing, 2010), *Landscapes of*

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Longing (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2009), and *Discovering Mortality* (March Street Press, 2005), a finalist for the Brockman-Campbell Book Award. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *MARGIE*, *Poet Lore*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Iodine Poetry Review*, *Roanoke Review*, and other journals. He is the founding director of Bridges Tutoring, an organization in Raleigh, North Carolina, which educates multicultural students. Learn more at www.BruceLader.com.

NICHOLAS LAUGHRIDGE is a 2009 graduate of Gardner-Webb University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing. He lives in Gastonia, North Carolina, and enjoys reading, writing, and playing video games. Laughridge's work has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

BRENDA KAY LEDFORD is a member of North Carolina Writers' Network, North Carolina Poetry Society, and listed with *A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers*. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Charlotte Poetry Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Our State*, and other publications. Finishing Line Press published two of her poetry chapbooks. She received the Paul Green Multimedia Award from North Carolina Society of Historians for her poetry collections *Patchwork Memories*, *Shew Bird Mountain*, and the 2009 Paul Green Award for her third book, *Sacred Fire*.

ROBERT McCALL is the manager of the Saluda Community Library in Saluda, North Carolina. "Ash Wednesday" was a finalist for the 2009 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize sponsored by the North Carolina Writers' Network.

PATRICK McDONALD is a 2010 graduate of Gardner-Webb University who lives in Statesville, North Carolina, and owns two cats. He majored in English with an emphasis in creative writing. McConald plans to write novels and possibly screenplays for television and movies.

JOSEPH MURPHY is a professional editor and writer who lives in Michigan. Murphy won the Eisner Prize for poetry in the early 1970s, University of California at Berkley's highest award in the arts, and began writing poetry again a few years ago. His poetry has been published

in a number of journals, including *Living Poets*, *The Tower Journal*, and *Talon Magazine*, and forthcoming in *Vox Poetica* and *Your Daily Poem*.

JACK NAISH lives in Belmont, North Carolina with his wife, dog, and his daughter, Finley. He is a former winner of J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Prize, and his work has appeared previously in *The Broad River Review*.

JANEY PEASE holds a master's degree in agency counseling and post-graduate certification in expressive arts therapy. She is currently finishing another master's degree in piano performance at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Her poetry has been published in five editions of *The Broad River Review*, as well as in *Headwaters: Appalachian Journal of Expressive Arts Therapy*. She has worked with Appalachian women on song-writing projects and works with residents on creative writing and song writing projects at a recovery-based "Healing Farm" in North Carolina.

GREGORY RAMIREZ was born in Fresno, California, where he was raised and currently resides with his wife Stephanie and daughter Gabriella. His poetry has appeared in *Flies, Cockroaches, and Poets, hardpan: a journal of poetry*, Heyday Books' reprinting of *Highway 99: A Literary Journey Through California's Great Central Valley*, and *The Broad River Review*. He has taught at California State University, Fresno (where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English), Fresno City College, College of the Sequoias in Visalia, and University of Phoenix in Fresno. He currently teaches full-time at the Madera Community College Center.

WILLIAM REICHARD is a writer, editor, and educator. He is the author of four collections of poetry: *Sin Eater* (2010), *This Brightness* (2007), *How To* (2004) all from Mid-List Press, and *An Alchemy in the Bones* (1999) from New Rivers Press. He lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

NIKKI RAYE RICE will graduate from Gardner-Webb University in May 2011 with a bachelor's degree in English with a creative writing emphasis. Rice's short story "Porch Spider," which was published in *The Broad River Review* 2010, won second place in fiction from the North Carolina College Media Association. Rice is from Hickory, North Carolina.

STEVE ROBERTS is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *Another Word for Home* (Main Street Rag Press, 2010), another full-length collection of poems, *A Space inside a Space* (St. Andrews College Press, 1999), and a chapbook, *Every September* (Tragically Hip Press, 1998). Roberts earned a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina and a master's from Hollins College, where he received the Hollins College Graduate Fellowship and the Claytor Award for Poetry. His poetry has appeared in *Fresh, Aries, Nantahala, The New St. Andrews Review, Pembroke Magazine, Asheville Poetry Review*, among others. Roberts has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and received an Academy of American Poets Prize. A native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, living in Wilmington, he has also received numerous credits for art department and acting in film and television.

JUSTIN ROPER is a native of Cleveland County, North Carolina, and resides just outside of Boiling Springs. Photography has been a passion of his for the past ten years, and he has won multiple awards and ribbons for his photographs. Justin is currently the Editor & Producer for Cleveland Headline News out of Shelby, North Carolina.

KEITH RUSSELL is Chair of the English Department at Lindenwood University – Belleville. His scholarly work has appeared in *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* and *Notes on Contemporary Literature*; his poetry can be read in *Untamed Ink, The Iguana Review, and I 70 Review*, among others. Russell enjoys many strands of global and American literature, baseball, travel, and rock music.

MARY-CELESTE SCHREUDER lives in Nashville, Tennessee and teaches high school English and French. This summer, she and her husband Michael are moving to Oxford, England, where she hopes to continue teaching and writing poetry. Mary plans to gain writing inspiration by meandering in the Oxford University gardens and biking along the river Thames. This is Schreuder's first publication.

L.B. SEDLACEK's poems have appeared in such publications as *Audience Magazine, Heritage Writer, Red River Review, Bear Creek Haiku, I-70 Review, Bent Pin Quarterly, ditch poetry, Adaigo Verse Quarterly, Illumen, and Gloom Cupboard*. L.B.'s latest chapbook is *Red Headed Eskimos*. Sedlacek also hosts the small press podcast, "Coffee House to Go."

M. E. SILVERMAN currently resides in Georgia, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Mizmor L'David Anthology: The Shoah, Crab Orchard Review, Chicago Quarterly Review, The Los Angeles Review, Naugatuck River Review, Cloudbank, Front Range Review, Pacific Review, Moulin Review, Sugar House Review*, and other magazines. He was a finalist for the 2008 *New Letters Poetry Award* and the 2008 DeNovo Contest.

ALLEN SMITH, originally from Durham, North Carolina, is a poet now living in Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of a chapbook, *Unfolding Maps* (Puddinghouse Publications 2009), and contributed an essay to *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them* (University of Wisconsin Press 2009). His poems have appeared in *Bay Leaves, The Broad River Review*, and *Crucible*, among other publications.

HAILEY SPEARMAN is a North Carolinian by chance, born and raised in the All-American city of Gastonia, North Carolina, but has always not-so-secretly longed for Virginia—open fields, farms, and the Blue Ridge. When she's not composing gloriously rebellious and opinionated poems about the current state of dilemma known as American society, Spearman enjoys many activities, including reading, studying, teaching, hiking, mountain biking, kayaking, whitewater rafting, playing soccer, strumming her Fender acoustic, picking her banjo, singing, and doing everything in her power to save the planet. After graduating from Gardner-Webb University in August 2009, Spearman took a job as an eleventh grade English teacher at an area high school, and currently resides in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

SARAH STEADMAN is originally from Minnetonka, Minnesota. She is a junior English major with a professional writing emphasis at Gardner-Webb University. Steadman has been a member of Gardner-Webb's NCAA Division I swim team for the past three years. She enjoys traveling, writing, camping, photography, and anything relating to the outdoors. Steadman's goal and dream job one day would be to incorporate all of these activities.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives in North Carolina, but is an Indiana farm girl at heart. Her poems and academic writing have appeared in *Mount Olive Review, Beacon, Bay Leaves, Ibbetson Street, Bee Culture, Exit*

109 and *You Gotta Love 'Em* anthologies, on *New Verse News*, and in *The Broad River Review* 2009. She edits the newsletter for the North Carolina Poetry Society.

AMY UNSWORTH earned her master's degree in British and American literature from Kansas State University. Prior poetry publications include *Tar River Poetry*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *60 Seconds to Shine: 221 Monologues for Women*, and *The Briar Cliff Review*. She writes about poetry and the writing life online at her blog, Small Branches Poetry. She lives with her husband and three sons in Lansing, Kansas.

COLLYN WARNER is a junior English and Social Sciences major at Gardner-Webb University. From Shelby, North Carolina, Warner enjoys reading, writing, and going to art museums, poetry readings, musical performances, and coffeeshops. Collyn works for the Cleveland County Democratic Party. On campus, she participates in Alpha Chi, Sigma Tau Delta, College Democrats, Marching Band, and Model Arab League. Living in world where she sees myriad social injustices, Warner wishes to continue working in public service to alleviate the maladies of the human race. One way she does this is through poetry.

SCOTT WIGGERMAN is the author of two books of poetry, *Vegetables and Other Relationships* and *Presence*, forthcoming from Pecan Grove Press. A frequent workshop instructor, he is also an editor for Dos Gatos Press, publisher of the annual Texas Poetry Calendar, now in its thirteenth year. His website is <http://swig.tripod.com>.

LAURA MADELINE WISEMAN is the recipient of the 2009 Academy of American Poets Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she is a doctoral candidate and teaches English. Her chapbook *My Imaginary* (Dancing Girl Press, 2010) was a finalist in four national contests. She is also the author of *Ghost Girl*, a chapbook forthcoming from Pudding House. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Feminist Studies*, *MARGIE*, *Arts & Letters*, and elsewhere. Other awards include the Mari Sandoz Award in fiction, the Will Jumper Award in poetry, and five Pushcart Prize nominations.

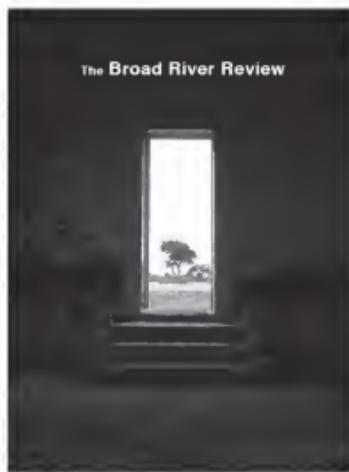
BLONNIE BUNN WYCHE was born in the Blue Ridge, grew up in the Piedmont, and married into the coastal plains of North Carolina. Her

young adult historical novel, *The Anchor: P. Moore, Proprietor* (Banks Channel Books) won the American Association of University Women Juvenile Fiction Award, the Clark Cox Historical Fiction Award, and was a finalist for the Book of the Year Award by *ForeWord Magazine*. The sequel, *Cecilia's Harvest* (Dram Tree Books), was reviewed by several magazines, including the *Historical Novels Review*. Several of her short stories are published and have won awards. Blonnie lives in Wilmington, North Carolina.

JOHN THOMAS YORK grew up in Yadkin County in northwestern North Carolina and now lives in Greensboro, where he teaches in the public schools. His poetry has appeared in *Appalachian Journal*, *Greensboro Review*, *International Poetry Review*, and many other magazines. In 2008, he won the Poet Laureate Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society. This fall his third chapbook, *Naming the Constellations*, will be published by Spring Street Editions of Sylva, North Carolina.

The Broad River Review

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